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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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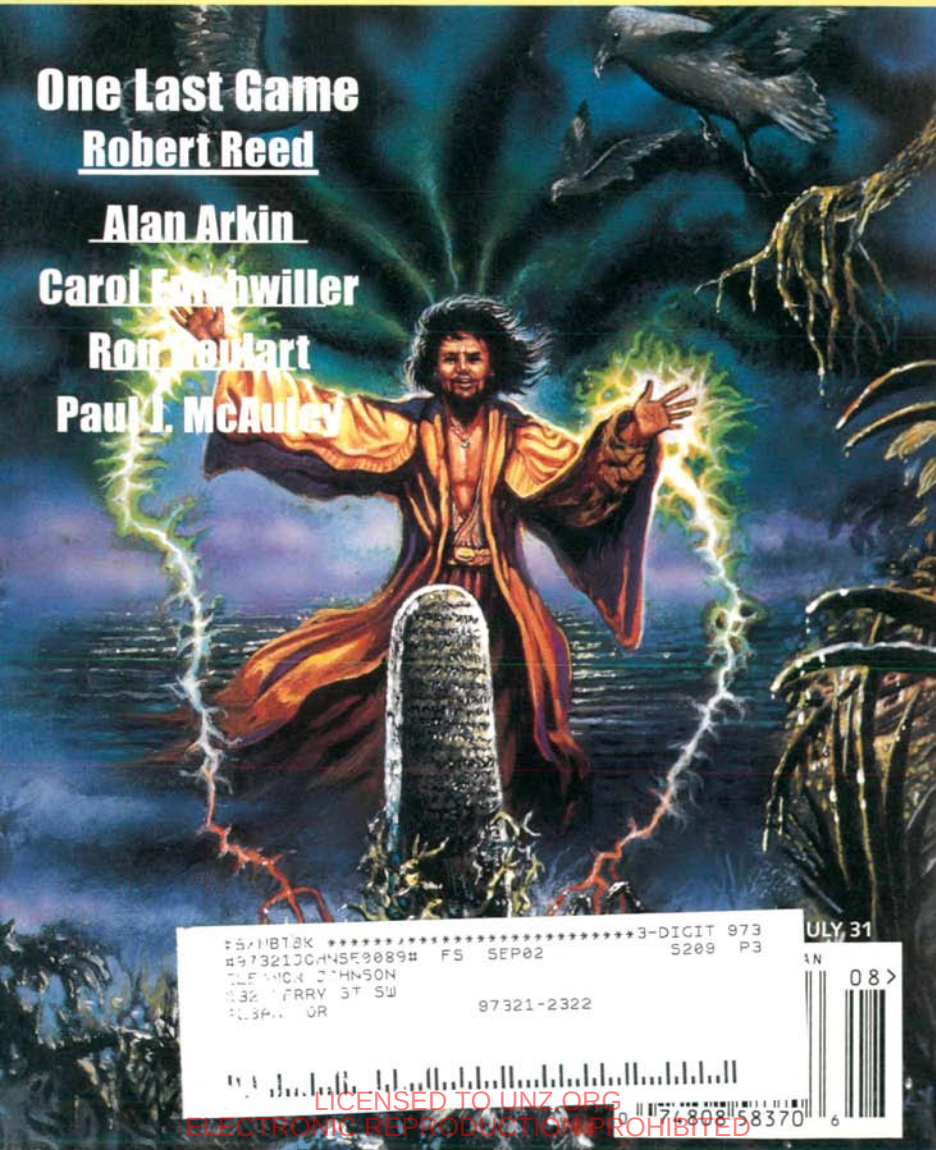

One Last Game
Robert Reed

Alan Arkin

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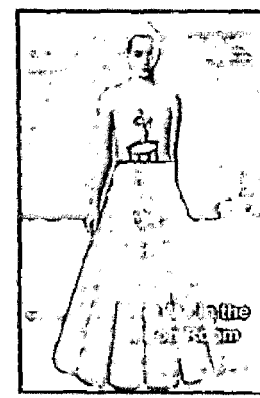

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Robert Reed's recent appearances in our pages include "Crooked Creek," "Season to Taste," and "Market Day." Somehow, we've gone almost three months without a new story from him, an error we're happy to rectify. "One Last Game" follows thematically from two of Mr. Reed's earlier stories for us, "Will Be" (Jan. 1999) and "The Gulf" (Oct. 2000). If you haven't read those stories already, we predict that you will...which might mean that you already did...

One Last Game

By Robert Reed

Saturday

PATIENCE WAS ONE OF MOM'S words.

Tolerance and *cooperation* were two more fat favorites.

Of course she didn't say those words by their lonesome. It was more like, "Be patient with people. Be tolerant of people. Cooperate, even when it hurts." Then after a big pause, she'd say, "No, you need to cooperate particularly when it hurts. Promise me that. Please, would you, Neil?"

He pretended not to be listening.

Then she looked back at him. She made certain that he saw her stern face, and for the trillionth time, she said, "I know you'll be the oldest one there. But that's just the way it is, and you're going to have to make the best of things."

The best of things — that was pure, undiluted Mom.

Neil treated her to a little nod and shrugged as if his shoulders ached. Then just to shut her up, he said, "All right. I'll try."

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"Do more than try," she countered.

Which was a pretty stupid way to talk, if you thought about it. What could any person do besides try? Yet Neil made himself nod as if agreeing, and that bought him another twenty minutes of being unpestered. He was sitting in the back of the van, alone with their luggage and groceries and the old croquet set, listening to his music while playing a few rounds of Nuke the Fools. It helped him concentrate, the game did. He barely noticed the ugly-ass country sliding past their shit-for-guts van. But then he stopped playing, giving his eyes a rest, and he found himself staring out over the flat fields of corn and things that weren't corn, and he was thinking about the lake again. Neil didn't quite believe in this lake. Maybe his folks believed that it existed. And maybe the Hawthornes honestly thought they owned a cabin beside the water. And sure, people had been talking about Okoboji since Neil could remember, telling stories about the boating and the swimming and shit like that. A few friends even came home with bad sun burns. But that didn't prove anything. This semi-famous lake was just a little drop of blue in their Rand McNally, and it was so many words spoken by others, and Neil was fourteen years old — a huge and important and extremely wise age — and he didn't believe in anything just because everyone said that it had to be true.

Dad was driving; Mom was using their Rand McNally to navigate. She seemed to be telling him where to turn next, and Dad said something, pointing at the dash, and Mom did a good job of looking out the window, pretending not to notice. Their van was a genuine pile of crap. Red lights came on every time they took it out on the road. Usually the lights didn't mean anything, and they got home fine. But this was a long-haul trip, and Neil could taste the worry in the air. And the worry got worse when they pulled off the Interstate, nothing but little two-lane state highways between them and this mythical lake.

They stopped in some little-ass town. "For lunch," Dad claimed. But mostly it was to give the engine a chance to breathe.

They had burgers at Hardees, then while they were walking back to the crap-van, Mom said, "Why don't you sit in the middle seat? Would you do that for me?"

"Why?" Neil asked.

Mom didn't have a good excuse. So instead, she told the truth.

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Looking straight at him, she said, "It doesn't look right. Us up in front and you way in the back."

It looked just fine to Neil.

But he moved his gear to the middle seat and settled behind Dad as the old man wrestled with the van, trying to get it running again. Grind-grind-grind. Pause. Then another grind, followed by the sputtering roar of an overheated, under-oiled, and basically spent engine. Then Neil had his music going nice and loud, and he was nuking cities filled with nothing but fools...right up until Mom yanked off his headphones and covered the game screen with an angry hand, repeating what she's said only a million times before.

"Be patient with these kids. I know you'll be the oldest, so I expect you to take some responsibility with the others."

Neil looked out at the ugly-ass fields.

"What did I just say?" Mom asked.

"That I'm a child," he grumbled.

She could have said anything. But instead of talking, she decided to look sad and frustrated, throwing that sad look toward Dad. And maybe the old man felt her eyes. Whatever, he gave a half-glance over his shoulder, telling Neil, "Yeah, that's what you are. A child."

Then he looked forward again, eyes jumping from the temperature gauge to the oil-pressure gauge and back again. And talking to someone — Neil or Mom, or maybe to himself — he said, "But you're not the oldest kid. Not in this bunch, you're not."

THE GAME GROUP were five couples. The Hawthornes. The Shepherds. The Millers. The Jensens. And Neil's folks. Most everyone had graduated together from the same high school, and if you listened to them, you'd think that it was the best time of their lives. Neil couldn't count how many times he'd heard those same stupid stories about the same long-ago people. It was as if everything had happened just yesterday. Not twenty years ago, or whatever it was. Mom openly claimed that she'd loved her school days, and she missed them. But Neil had noticed how all these happy schoolmates went to the same junior high too, yet nobody seemed to talk about those days — a fact that proved what Neil could sense

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for himself. That junior high sucked, and nobody, even if they had the power, would ever make themselves fourteen again.

Dad wasn't like those other adults. He came from the far end of the state, from entirely different circumstances. He was a Marine for a couple stints, and he met Mom when he finally got to college. A few years later, they were married and living half a mile from the house where Mom grew up, and they began hanging out with her old school buddies. That's how the game group got rolling. Once a month, everyone would show up at someone's house or apartment, and they'd pick a game that everybody could play together. Back then, only Neil's folks were married. A face or two changed during those earliest days. But eventually everybody settled down and got married, and those were the people that Neil knew today. Except for a few teachers, Neil knew them better than any other adults. Which wasn't to say he knew them all that well, or that he felt warm and gushy toward them.

Neil was the first kid born in the group, and for a little while, he was important. There were a bunch of old videos that his folks brought out whenever he needed to be embarrassed. They showed him as a toddler performing tricks for a room full of laughing, drunken adults. Walking was a trick back then, and he was the center of the universe. But then he suddenly got to be five years old, and the Hawthornes and Shepherds had their first babies on the same day. After that, everyone was having kids. Triplets, in the Jensens' case. Everyone had their own, and Neil was forgotten, and today there were eleven kids, counting Neil, with him being the only only-child in the bunch.

That wasn't the plan. He'd heard it a billion times from Mom, and maybe twice from Dad. Neil was an accident. "A nice accident," Mom would always add. "A lovely one." But definitely, he was a big surprise.

There was supposed to have been a baby sister or brother. That was the plan when they moved into their current house. Money had been saved, and Dad was doing well enough at work, and they were trying. "Trying." It was the word they'd offer to the game-group, halfway laughing but smiling in a serious way. Sometimes, Neil could hear them trying. Once, after the group had gone home, his folks were too drunk or just assumed that he was sleeping, leaving their bedroom door open and trying their damnedest. But judging by the noises, someone was too drunk,

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and things weren't working as they should. Which made for a pretty strange set of sounds to be hearing when you're ten years old, lying in the dark and unable to sleep.

There was a bedroom next to his folks' room just waiting for the baby. But Mom was having troubles. That was one bit of news that Neil had to pick up without being told. Mom had gained weight when she had him, and that was a problem. Maybe. So she took up this brutal diet and started to exercise. Then her doctor told her to stop running, because that didn't help either. And then it wasn't a matter of what she weighed or how much she rode the stationary bike. It was something about Mom's plumbing, and that's when things got real serious. There were trips to special doctors and weird whispering about eggs and wriggly sperm and tricks done in someone's fancy kitchen. And there were the bills that came in thick white envelopes that Dad would open as if expecting to find bombs.

Finally, there came a day when nobody mentioned baby sisters and brothers. Something big and final had been decided. The next thing Neil knew, his father was punching out the wall of the nursery, joining it with the master bedroom. Dad was doing the work by himself because, as he put it with a grim satisfaction, "I don't know what I'm doing, so I can do it cheap."

Everything about their lives was cheap, these days. It was because of the doctor bills and because Dad got passed over at work, two or three times at last count, and because Mom had decided to quit her office job, thinking that she'd make more money and have more fun if she worked at a desk in their big damp basement.

Sometimes his folks were nothing but fools. They were a burden for Neil, and an embarrassment. It was bad enough they had trouble making house payments, but at the same time the rest of their gang had trouble spending all of their money. Every game night, someone had to boast about what they were buying or building or making in the stock market. Nobody was rich-rich. But some of those people could see real wealth from where they were standing, while Neil's parents were fighting just to keep their old friends in sight.

After every party, there was the complaining.

There was the wishing.

There was Mom saying, "I'm glad Matt's doing well, but why does Becky have to keep bringing up his promotion."

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Then Dad would say, "The Shepherds are going to France again. Did you hear?"

"And the Millers are heading for Tahiti," Mom would growl. "For two long weeks after Christmas, Sarah told me."

Which made Dad wince and feel sad about himself. He was a plain man with a narrow mouth and sorry eyes, and Mom was pretty but fat again, fatter than ever, and when she was feeling sad, her eyes got big and bright, and her wide mouth clamped down until there was nothing but an angry little line. They fed off each other, which couldn't be good. It was something that Neil was beginning to see for himself. And that was why he tried to butt in, just one time, clearing his throat in a big way and telling them with his best reasonable voice, "I know what you should do. Stop going to the damned game nights, if they're so awful."

It was a smart suggestion. It was smart when he said it, and it was still smart today.

But his folks hit him with hard, hurt looks, and Mom told him, "Don't be absurd. These are our friends."

More her friends than Dad's. But Neil didn't say the obvious.

"We just have to blow off steam every now and then," Mom told him. Or maybe she was talking to herself. "It's okay, in private," she added. In public, of course, everyone would have to be tolerant, and patient, and cooperate with the windbags.

Yeah, Neil knew the speech.

Mom looked at Dad, telling him something with her eyes.

Then Dad cleared his throat, agreeing with Mom. "We've invested a lot of years with this group, and they're our friends." Then after a little pause, he added, "And I'm not going to be the first one to drop out."

Which was a pretty stupid reason to do anything, Neil knew. But he didn't say it, or anything. Sometimes you can try all you want, but people just won't listen to the things that are true.

There was a real lake, as it turned out. Rolling corn fields gave way to a few wind-beaten trees and a busy little town filled with summer traffic, plus little prairie ponds set beside the highway, and coming up over the crest of a sudden hill, Neil caught a glimpse of bluish-green water surrounded by an army of cabins and houses. The Hawthornes had just

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built their cabin, and the group had been invited up for the weekend. That word — "cabin" — brought to mind things like outdoor johns and beaver pelts nailed to pine walls. But Neil remained skeptical, and it was smart of him. Following the directions on the printed invitation, Dad pulled into a long driveway of clean new concrete. A big swing set and sandpile were set in the newly sodded lawn. Two minivans and someone's fat-ass Expedition were parked where the driveway widened. There was a two-car garage, and sprouting off the back of the garage was a long building that would have looked like a house anywhere else in the world. And a big house, at that. Just how big wasn't apparent from the driveway. They had to climb out and take the long walk up a fancy flagstone path to the first door. The doorbell sounded like real bells. One of the kids opened the door. Neil remembered the face but not the warpaint or the plastic sword.

"What's the password?" the kid barked.

"Hello, Collin," said Mom, her and Dad stepping past the kid.

"What's the password?" he asked Neil, poking him in the belly with the point of the sword.

"I'll let you live," Neil rumbled. "How's that?"

Collin swallowed those words and shrank down a little bit. But then he smiled and lifted his sword, an important voice saying, "You can pass."

The house went on and on. There was a hallway and stairs leading up and a kitchen and some kind of playroom on the ground floor, and after that, a dining room and living room that were visible from a distance. The living room was more windows than walls, and the early afternoon sun was making the air conditioning work. "If this was a cabin," Neil thought out loud, "then our house is a damned shack."

"Enough," barked Dad.

But the old man was thinking the same thing.

"Where's everyone?" asked Mom.

Collin was following them. "In the front yard," he reported.

Didn't they come from the front yard? Apparently not. The door leading outside had been left open, which had to piss the air conditioning off. Neil could hear the machine running. He was following his folks out across a narrow green lawn, climbing a last little rise before the world fell away. A smaller second building was perched on the steep slope, zigzagging stairs leading to it and then past, reaching a wooden dock that

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stretched out into the water. Kids were running on the dock and bobbing in the greenish water, and they were shouting. A girl's voice was shouting, "Help, I'm drowning. Help!"

Nobody seemed to notice. She was just making noise apparently. But even if it was noise, Neil wished that she'd shut up.

A pontoon boat was tied against the dock, and a little sailboat, and about a thousand inflated doughnuts and styrofoam kickboards were scattered across the dock and on the water and taking breathers on the muddy sand of the beach. A square platform was moored farther out on the lake. Two grown men were on top of it, wrestling. They looked silly in those long swimsuits. They were a little fat, and pink, and very slow. It was Mr. Hawthorne and Mr. Miller. A couple million bucks were pushing hard at each other, and after a moment, they collapsed from exhaustion, laughing and flopping down on their backs.

Most of the kids were in the water. They wore life jackets. Even Claudia Hawthorne wore a big orange jacket, splashing in the shallowest water, shouting, "Help me!" at the top of her lungs.

The adults were sitting at the end of the dock, waving hard at the newcomers. Mom and Dad practically broke into a run, needing to get to them. To say their hellos and show off their smiles. Everything was very social and very loud, and Neil wanted to be anywhere else. He was thinking about his games in the van, thinking that maybe he could take them and vanish inside that big house. But when he turned to look back up the stairs, he noticed Mrs. Miller swimming hard from somewhere up the beach. It was a long way to the next dock, but he had the impression that she had come that far. She did a mean freestyle, steady and strong and lifting her head high every now and then, checking on her position. When she reached the dock, she stood on the lake bottom and wiped her face a couple times. Squinting, she said, "Neil?" with a friendly voice.

He said, "Hi."

Then she grabbed a little ladder and started to climb out, tired arms lifting her only so far before she had to pause, her feet feeling for the lowest rung. The warm green water was sliding off her swimsuit and off her body. It was a one-piece suit. Mostly, it was solid and thick, and nothing showed. Except that it wasn't meant for real swimming, and when she finished her climb, she happened to bend forward, the soaked fabric pulled down by its

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own weight, letting her tits halfway pour out into the sunshine. They were big and soft-looking and white as could be, and Neil couldn't do anything but stand there, staring hard, thinking that there was something dangerous in this. In this staring. But he could practically see Mrs. Miller's nipples, and there wasn't anything else in the world.

A few seconds later, he was asking Dad for the car keys.

"Leave your games alone," Mom growled at him.

But with a perfect honesty, Neil could tell her, "No, I'm going to get my suit and change. I want to go for a swim."

To his folks, that sounded like welcome news.

"If you can, bring in some of our luggage — " Dad started.

"Maybe," was the best that Neil could promise. Mrs. Miller was bending over again, toweling herself dry, and it was all that he could to keep his eyes in his skull.

IN THAT LITTLE while it took Neil to put on his suit and run back to the dock, everything had changed. Most of the adults had moved to the pontoon boat, and the outboard was growling, making the air stink. Still in street clothes, his folks were flanking Mrs. Miller, as if keeping her safe, and Mr. Hawthorne gave Neil a big wave, asking, "What do you want? A trip around the lake, or stay here and help kid-sit?"

Dad said something too soft to be heard.

"I'll come along," Neil volunteered.

Which gave the adults an excuse for a good little laugh.

After two minutes of chugging across the open water, Neil was wishing that he'd stayed behind. Everyone was talking, and the only subject was the cabins. Who owned what? Which were the prettiest? The fanciest? The best to buy? Neil ended up watching the water and the other boats, and he gave Mrs. Miller a good glance when he didn't think anyone would notice. But she was wearing a shirt now, and there was nothing to see but her strong smooth legs — except once when she moved on the padded seat, a few curly dark hairs sneaking out through the elastic of her suit, hinting at everything that was hidden.

The lake was filled with fast boats pulling water skiers and flocks of roaring, graceful Jetskis. The big pontoon boat plodded its way through

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that delicious mayhem. People had to slow or steer wide of them, and it was embarrassing. Out of simple frustration, Neil asked Mrs. Hawthorne, "Why don't you have any Jetskis?"

"We'll get some toys like that," she replied. "When Claudia and Collin are your age, and ready."

Jetskis weren't toys; they were serious, important machines. But Neil didn't bother correcting the woman. Instead, he sat quietly and let his mind wander along with his eyes. Time grew slow and heavy as their boat made its circuit of the lake. There was a novelty with the sun on the water and the occasional tickle of spray against his upwind cheek, but the fun wore down after a while. In some ways, it was neat to sit among happy adults, listening to their quick patter, wondering at what point in his life he would find such a confident, almost brazen voice. But by mid-voyage, he was completely bored and more than a little uncomfortable. Mrs. Miller had thrown a towel over her legs, protecting them from the sun. Mr. Hawthorne was letting the other men take the wheel, but nobody thought to offer that responsibility to the boy. Neil moved back beside the rumbling motor, letting himself broil in the sun, ignoring his mother when she said, "You're going to burn." He wouldn't. Not this late in the summer, he wouldn't. Then with the adults huddling under the canopy, Neil was free to stare at the water and think about anything, including how much he wanted to be anywhere but here.

Finally Mr. Hawthorne took back the wheel and pulled up next to his dock. But Neil wasn't happy here, either. The triplets were screaming on the beach. Claudia was still shouting, "I'm drowning. Help me, help me." Collin and the two Shepherd boys were running on the hard planks, beating each other with Roman swords and styrofoam noodles. It would be a fun game, for about two seconds. Neil resisted the temptation. Mrs. Jensen was sitting nearby, pretending to be a lifeguard when she wasn't reading her fat novel. When Claudia yelled for help again, the woman looked up. But it was Neil that she was watching. "How was your trip?" she asked, showing a sly little smile.

Mrs. Jensen wasn't as pretty as Mrs. Miller. Or as built. But Neil had always halfway liked talking to the woman.

"Did you have fun?" she pressed.

He said, "Yes," because that seemed like the polite thing to say.

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Mrs. Jensen's sunglasses had slipped down her whitened nose. She pushed them back up, and her smile changed, and shaking her head, she said, "Really?" She said, "I'd have a hard time buying that."

Despite his doubts, the rest of the afternoon had its fun. Neil began by swimming out to the floating platform and back again, then diving into the weedy depths with a leaky mask strapped to his face. When those adventures got old, there were chicken fights in the bathwarm shallows. Neil was too long and lanky to ride anyone. Not that he wanted to ride, of course. But he didn't weigh much more than a hundred pounds, and some of these kids were real chunks. Fat or solid, they were hard to lift, and moving with them on his shoulders was about the toughest work he'd ever done. It was the little kids who made the best partners. Like the Jensen triplets. They were wiry and strong for five-year-olds. Barbie Jensen would wrap her legs around Neil's neck and shoulders, and an adult man carrying some beefy kid would charge and knock the girl backward. But she'd pop right up again. And if they got behind the man while he was fighting someone else, they could knock him off his feet, and that's how you sometimes won this very simple game.

Between rounds, Claudia swam up to him. She was turning ten in another month, and her parents had already bought her a pony as a birthday gift. She explained all of this in a breathless rush, floating high in the water because she was fat and because of her big orange life jacket. Then she said, "Let's be partners. Okay?"

She had to be as heavy as Neil. That's why he asked, "If I say yes, what'll you give me?"

Not missing a beat, Claudia said, "You can ride my pony."

"Oh, wow," he said sarcastically. "Gosh, jeez."

Claudia heard what she wanted to hear. She assumed they had a deal, and when Neil turned to leave, she grabbed hold of his head and flung her thick legs over his shoulders. Neil was trapped, at least for the moment. He sank into the warm water, letting the girl scramble into position above him. Then he rose up to where he was holding most of her weight and too much of his own. He sagged and moaned under the waves, then lifted his mouth high enough to take a pained gulp of air, moving them into deeper water to let himself stand taller, bracing for the first assault.

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Neil's plan was to lose. Someone would give them a little shove, and he would pitch to one side as if shot, dive deep and slip free of the fat girl.

But their opponents were HannahMiller riding high on her mother's strong shoulders. Mrs. Miller was in shallower water, her suit filling with water as she lifted her eight-year-old into the air, those big breasts threatening to spill free. Then she adjusted her straps and started her charge, laughing as she pushed her way through the lake. Neil watched how the water lifted and broke over the pale smooth flesh, and he stared as the breasts dove beneath the surface, bearing down on him. Then something obvious occurred to him, and he grunted to Claudia, "Hold on. Tight!"

It was a short, forever sort of battle. The four of them collided along with their foam and shouts, and the high arms were grasping while the lower arms held tight to the clinging legs. Neil and Claudia had momentum, and Mrs. Miller was laughing too hard to fight back. For an instant, it looked as if she might lose. Claudia gave Hannaha yank, and their opponents started to fall. But the fat girl didn't have a killer instinct. She let them recover, which was fine with Neil. Then everyone was close and pushing hard, and Neil felt a small strong hand against his ribs, then tugging at Claudia's foot. It was a woman's hand. It was touching him, pretty much. So Neil reached out and yanked at Hannah's foot, and his quick fingers brushed against one of Mrs. Miller's breasts — her left breast — the wet fabric barely obscuring the living swell of flesh that seemed to Neil, for that wondrous instant, to be the genuine center of the universe.

Then Claudia confused him for her six-hundred-pound pony. She threw her weight to one side, their center of gravity suddenly outside Neil's body, and he was falling sideways, his bare feet dancing across the muddy sand of the lake floor. He wanted to remain standing. He desperately wanted a second chance to touch the breast. Another quick feel; that would be perfect. But the fat girl kept fighting him, twisting her legs and hips, and Neil was underwater and sinking fast when a pain attached itself to his badly twisted neck, causing him to scream and drop deeper, shoving at the girl's fat ass in order to free himself, at last.

Neil's neck had broken.

That was his first horrific impression. But then he realized that he could move his limbs and even swim, buoyed up by the water and a white-hot

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misery. He surfaced weakly and made no sound for a moment or two. Where was Mrs. Miller? Nowhere close, he realized. She and her daughter had wandered off, looking for fresh victims. Meanwhile Claudia splashed behind him, telling the world, "I'm drowning, help!" She screamed, "Neil! Look at me!" So he turned, his neck burning somewhere near its mangled base. Then she giggled and said, "Save me, Neil! Save me!"

It was easy to say those next words.

"You're as big as a fucking pony!" Neil snapped.

For the first time today, Claudia fell silent.

"You broke my neck, you goddamn horse — !"

His belongings were in the house, set in a heap in the room where his parents were planning to spend the night. The unairconditioned boathouse was reserved for the children and whichever parents drew the long straw. But for now, Neil could use his parents' bed. He was under strict orders to sleep and also keep a big ice pack pressed against his aching neck, which was a ridiculous pair of assignments. Between the pain and the cold, sleep was impossible. So what Neil did instead was play a few rounds of Time's Arrow, pretending that he was Agent Nano searching through Roman times, trying to stop Count Kliss and his minions before they forever altered history.

"How are you feeling, dear?"

He froze the game and folded up the screen. Without moving his head, Neil told his mother, "The same."

The pack was more water than ice now. Mom took it from under him and sat on the edge of the bed, starting to rub his neck and then thinking better of it. She bit her lower lip for a moment, then said, "You know, she has a crush on you."

A sudden impossible hope pounced on him.

But Mom had to ruin everything, saying, "Claudia practically adores you."

"Oh," Neil whispered. "Her."

"She's awfully sorry for this. I don't think she's stopped crying yet." Mom was telling him this for a reason, but she wouldn't just come out and say it. She didn't know what Neil had said to the fat girl, or she was pretending not to know. Either way, she decided to change the subject,

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smiling when she said, "Dinner's almost ready. If you want, come down and eat with the rest of us."

His neck ached, but Neil was famished, too.

"Laura says it's just a muscle strain."

Laura Shepherd was a dermatologist, which made her opinions a little suspect.

"Are you coming?" Mom pressed.

Neil unfolded the screen again, but only to clear the game. He wasn't doing that well anyway. Obviously, what he needed was food.

DINNER WAS LOUD and busy and extraordinarily boring. Mr. Shepherd had cooked spaghetti in big pots, and it came out clumped together and halfway raw in the middle. Yet the adults had to tell each other how delicious everything was. Neil ate with them in the big living room. The kids and Dr. Shepherd used the dining room. Spills would be less of a problem there, and there were spills. The new carpet was stained at least twice before the kids were banished outside with popsicles. Plastic plates and empty bottles of wine were thrown into bulging trash sacks. More wine was opened, plus some tall cans of beer. Then the kids were brought back inside and stuffed into the playroom, along with maybe twenty million toys, six of which being interesting enough to be played with.

There were fights over those six good toys.

If Neil was healthy, he would have helped referee. But he wasn't well. He sat in the living room with his neck ridiculously straight, making a show of his misery. It was Dad, of all people, who vanished into that mayhem; and that left Neil in the equally unwelcome position of taking Dad's place in the evening's first game.

He had never played charades before and never would again. It was acting in public, which was something that he wouldn't do. So Mom did double-duty, standing in front of their team and making a fool of herself. And Neil did try to contribute to his team's efforts, but the books and movies and songs were from a world that he barely knew. Sometimes he'd blurt out a wrong answer, but mostly he just stayed quiet. And when his team lost, he pretended that it didn't bother him. That it was just a stupid game, which it was. One of several stupid games that were played in rapid succession.

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Neil watched the adults, listening to what they said when they weren't playing. Everyone looked tired and sounded happy and maybe they were a little drunk. Mrs. Miller was wearing summer clothes. Shorts and a light blouse and sandals. Neil kept remembering that her name was Sarah, and he would wonder how it would sound to say Sarah when he was alone again, in the dark. Her face was red from the sun and pretty in a grown-up way. He was watching her face when she noticed his gaze, and with a sudden little wink, she asked, "What should we play next?"

She was talking to the room, but the room was too busy to notice.

"My mother just turned seventy," Mom was shouting, apparently responding to some distant conversation. "And she doesn't even look sixty, which I'm taking to be a very good sign for my future."

In Neil's eyes, Grandma was nothing but a sputtering old seventy. Yet he decided to sit there, conspicuously saying nothing.

"And do you know her life-expectancy?" Mom continued. "I mean what those charts...the actuarial charts...do you know what they're predicting for her...?"

"Ninety-plus years," Mr. Jensen replied. "It's something like that, I would think."

Mom nodded. "Another twenty-three and a half years. Yes!"

Mr. Jensen was a lawyer and a genius. He was a small man, a little pudgy around the middle, and he looked like a genius should look, wearing thick glasses, his thick black hair going twenty ways at once. When the group played Trivial Pursuit, Mr. Jensen played alone. It was the group's special rule. He had no partner and no help, but more often than not, he'd still win their stupid game.

"If our parents reach old age," he explained, "then they've escaped the hazards of risky behavior and bad genetics. And if they have healthy habits after that, most of them are going to be around for a long time. One or two of them will make it to a hundred, easy."

The adults reacted to this news with a horrified cackle.

"God!" Dr. Shepherd called out. "I'm going to have to keep my house clean for another thirty years...just in case his mother shows for a snap inspection — !"

The laughter rose, then collapsed when it ran out of breath.

Mr. Hawthorne said, "Bullshit! Are you telling me that I've got to

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listen to my old man complain about politics until the middle of this century?"

"Maybe so," said Mr. Jensen. "Maybe so."

Mrs. Hawthorne grabbed her husband by the knee. "Maybe we should give our folks skydiving lessons. What do you think? For their anniversaries?"

Everyone howled with laughter.

Mrs. Miller said, "Or a float trip through the Grand Canyon, maybe?"

Which made Mom blurt, "Perfect! My mother can't swim a stroke!"

Neil couldn't believe what he was hearing. Sure, his parents liked to complain about their parents. But to say that you want them dead...to say it in public, even if it was just a joke...well, it made Neil uncomfortable and sad. Watching them bend over with laughter, he caught a glimpse of frustrations that were deep and private, and ancient...frustrations that he'd always assumed were peculiar to fourteen-year-old boys....

Mr. Jensen cleared his throat. "Lifespans are growing," he told Mom, and everyone. "If a woman in our generation can reach seventy, then she'll almost certainly live well past the century mark."

Mom got a look. She halfway shuddered, then made herself laugh. And turning to Neil, she blurted, "Just think, honey. I'm going to be your mom for another hundred years!"

Neil didn't know what to make of that threat. The adults had to be drunk. Whatever this was, this was a disgusting and fascinating business, and Neil could only just sit on the brand new couch, sipping his fifth or sixth coke of the day, wondering where things would lead next.

"Imagine," said Mrs. Hawthorne. "We're only a third of the way there!"

"If we make it to old age," Mr. Jensen cautioned. "Which is less likely for men than for women."

"As it should be!" Mrs. Miller trumpeted.

Again, Mom looked at her son. But she was asking Mr. Jensen her question. "And how long will our children live? Can you guess?"

"I can always guess," he replied, laughing softly.

Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, laughing and bending close to hear whatever he might say next.

"One hundred and fifty years," Mr. Jensen offered.

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"That much?" Mom cried out.

"Or a thousand years, maybe."

There was laughter, but it had a different color now. It was a bright, uncomfortable sound that evaporated into an abrupt and very nervous silence.

"Look at the last hundred years," Mr. Jensen continued. "Antibiotics. Transplants. Genetic engineering. Hell, how much of that was predicted?"

A genuine interest grabbed hold of Neil. "You really think so?" he sputtered.

"You'll live to walk on other worlds, my boy. I guarantee it."

Neil had always liked the man.

"Who knows what you might accomplish, given a thousand years?"

It was an idea that made Neil happy and warm, wiping away most of the pain in his poor neck. And that's when the idea hit him. It came from an obvious source, but he didn't mention his computer game. "Maybe when I'm done traveling to the planets," he began. "I don't know, but maybe I could travel back in time...."

"To where?" blurted Mrs. Miller. Then she added, "To when, I mean. And where also, I guess. Wouldn't it be?"

Neil thought of Rome and the Dark Ages and the other popular haunts of his computer self. But instead of those possibilities, he heard himself say, "Here. Maybe I'd come back to now, and here, just to tell you how things turn out and...I don't know...maybe let you know about the future, in little ways...."

That brought giggles and winces and every other uncomfortable expression.

For a moment, Neil felt foolish. He hoped this topic would pass. Collapse, and vanish. But then Mr. Jensen found something worthy in the possibility. Even intriguing. He jumped to his feet, swayed for a moment, then said, "Let's get the kids in here. Right now."

Mom asked, "What for?"

"We've got another game. A new game." Then he promised everyone, "It won't take two minutes. Or it'll take forever, depending on how you look at things."

People exchanged big-eyed looks, then agreed to play along. Mrs.

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Hawthorne went to get Dad and the kids. At Mr. Jensen's insistence, three video cameras were set up and left running. The kids were herded back into the room and told to sit together, as if posing for a group picture, and when Mr. Jensen finished his glass of dark wine, he stood in front of his audience, saying in a big, half-drunken way, "Listen to me. This is the night! We want to ask you a favor. A huge favor. When you've learned how to travel in time...maybe a thousand years from now...we want you to come back here. If it's possible. Please. Will you promise us that? Will you?"

These were little kids. They looked fried from too much fighting and too much fun, and whatever Mr. Jensen was saying, it was too strange and large for them to understand. But he sensed their limits. He made a stabbing gesture at a camera, adding, "We're going to talk to you about tonight. That's our promise. For years and years, your parents are going to remind you about the big commitment that you're making to us now."

But they hadn't said anything. Mostly, the kids sat motionless, looking ready to fall over into exhausted heaps.

"Promise us," said Mrs. Miller, getting into the mood of the moment. "Hannah? Say that you promise."

Her oldest squirmed, then said, "Okay. I guess."

Then Mrs. Miller turned to Neil. "You should promise for all of them. Would you do that for us?"

If anyone else had asked. But it was Sarah Miller, and he whispered, "Sure," and gave the cameras a little glance.

"What are you sure about?" Mom pressed.

Without too much life in his voice, he told them, "We'll come back. If it's possible, we'll visit you."

There was a strange, long pause. The adults acted as if they were waiting for some flash of light and the miraculous appearance of travelers from the far future. But then it was obvious that nothing would happen, and it was embarrassingly obvious that some people needed to stop drinking, at least for the time being. Over the next half-hour, most of the kids were successfully installed in the boathouse. The Hawthornes volunteered to stay with them, and that left the master bedroom free for Neil's parents, which left him with a real bed instead of a hard cot in the hot boathouse.

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Being an invalid wasn't too awful, Neil decided. He undressed slowly and climbed under the new white sheets, and Mom came in to check on him and collect her belongings. She said, "Here," and produced a little white pill. "Sarah gave this to me. It's a pain pill, and it'll help you sleep."

Neil wasn't too old to stop his mother from feeding him medicine.

"Sleep," she said again, rising and making certain that the lights were off in her wake.

Then the party started up again. The adults had found their second wind, more beers were being opened, and there was a loud, gunshot-like bang as a cork flew. That's when the pill started to work on him. Suddenly Neil felt himself tumbling down a long dark hole, feeling warm and weak, and his eyes were pulled shut by their own considerable weight, and even his heart seemed to grow stiller as something that wasn't true sleep took hold of him.

His room was directly above the front door.

He halfway remembered that.

And when he heard the ringing of a bell, close and insistent, some dim, still-conscious part of him was able to think, "That's someone. Someone outdoors. Someone who really wants to come inside...."

Sunday

THE DREAMLESS SLEEP ended with the abrupt closing of a door. Neil's eyes found themselves open again, revealing a strange room filled with a staggering light. Where was he? Then he remembered this room and his borrowed bed, and in his codeine-inspired confusion, he decided that Mom must have left a light burning after all. It felt as if only a minute had passed, at most. Someone had finally answered the doorbell. That's what he'd just heard, he decided. And that brilliant light was coming from...where...? From the bedroom window, apparently. How ridiculous was that? But after several deep breaths, what was obvious burrowed its way into his consciousness. Night was finished; somehow it had become morning. Entire hours had passed in what felt like a heartbeat. And once he accepted that improbability, Neil could let his eyes close again, trying to will himself back into that timeless place.

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The air-conditioning was running. He heard the steady hum of chilled air shoved through a vent, and in the distance, the constant complaining efforts of a compressor. But then it was cool enough indoors, and the machinery shut itself off with a solid *thunk*. He heard the *thunk*, followed by an imperfect silence. Birds were singing. A man at the far end of the cabin spoke a few words, then a few more. Then Neil heard the sharp aching sound of a person crying, and his natural first thought was to assume that a kid was pissed or sad or just too tired to do anything but cry. Except it sounded like a woman crying. Like his mother, sort of. And that sound finally made him sit up, dressing slowly, taking frequent breaks to rub at the stiff center of his neck.

The crying came from the master bedroom; hadn't his folks spent the night there? Except when Neil looked in through the open door, he found Mrs. Hawthorne sitting on the edge of the giant bed, wearing last night's clothes, mopping at her face with a soggy Kleenex.

Neil was embarrassed, and he was fascinated.

The woman looked into the hallway, but nothing registered in her sad red eyes. She had a puffy old face, and the hair that she always kept just-so had become frazzled and dirty. Quietly, she took a deep breath. Then she dropped her head and sniffed hard once and unwadded the Kleenex before giving her nose a hard long blow.

Neil retreated, finding the stairs and the kitchen. But the other adults were missing. Probably sleeping off their night. Serves them right, he thought with an easy piety. He snagged a cold pop, then drifted into the living room. Mrs. Miller was stretched out on the longest sofa, a brown afghan covering everything but her face and the small bare feet, eyes closed tight and a stillness embracing her entire body, making it appear as if she wasn't really breathing.

Neil hovered, watching her sleep.

Then she opened her eyes and looked straight at him. She was awake, alert. In her pretty face were hints of something that wasn't quite surprise, and the eyes were huge and red, blinking to make themselves wet.

"I'm sorry," Neil sputtered. "I woke you — "

"No." She shook her head. "No, I wasn't. You didn't."

He sipped his pop, trying to find something worth saying.

Mrs. Miller began to sit up, then remembered something. With the

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afghan still covering her body, she reached behind herself and deftly refastened her bra. Then she straightened the shirt that she'd worn last night, and she let the afghan fall to the floor and blinked her eyes hard a few times, rubbed at them, and with her face pointed at her toes, she asked, "What did you hear?"

"When?"

"Never mind." She looked at Neil. She was genuinely staring at him, as if he was an object deserving her fascination. Or was it fear? Then she asked the question again, but with different words. "How did you sleep?"

"Hard," he admitted.

"Codeine does that," she allowed. And she smiled at him. Then she thought to ask, "And how's your neck today?"

"Better."

She started to say, "Good." But another thought intruded, and she sat up straight and nodded toward the door, saying, "They're outside. On the patio. Go on."

His folks, she meant. They were sitting on the iron furniture, watching the sun rise. Neil preferred to be here, talking to this woman about sleep and body parts. But she was urging him to go see them, and that's what he did. Neil closed the door behind him, thinking of the air-conditioning. He could feel his folks' eyes cutting into him. Even before Neil looked at them, he knew they were staring. A feeling of deep shame took hold of him. Obviously, he had done something wrong. Something horrible. Then he remembered that ugliness with Claudia, and the shame made him shiver. Honestly, he deserved at least a few hard words. That's what he told himself. But when he looked up, they were smiling. They weren't his parents; his parents never smiled so much. At him. Grinning like idiots. At him.

Neil settled on the first iron chair, set his pop between his feet, and asked, "What?"

Dad said, "What?"

Mom just sighed and said, "Nothing. It's nothing."

"It got pretty wild last night," Dad offered. "Did we bother you?"

"Maybe," Neil began.

Both of them squared their shoulders and waited.

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Then Neil said, "No," and gave a big shrug. "The last thing I heard...I'm pretty sure...was someone at the door...."

Dad started to say something, then caught himself.

Mom made herself look up at the trees, and to nobody in particular, she said, "Listen to the birds."

These weren't his parents; they were sloppy imposters.

A nearby door flew open. Everyone gave a little jump. Then came the wild screams of a boy charging out of the boathouse, little feet slapping against the plank stairs. Neil saw one of the triplets pop into view, followed by his brother and Collin and the three Shepherd kids. A little race was being run. They were followed by the Miller girls, Hannah holding tight to her young sister's hand. Claudia was accompanied by her father, talking in a rapid, almost breathless voice about a dream involving her stupid-ass pony. And after them came the rest of the missing adults, the Jensens holding tight to their daughter who, grouchy from a lack of sleep, kept slapping at their clinging hands, screaming and squirming, complaining with a shrill and defiant little voice.

For no good reason, Neil's parents started to laugh now.

"Listen to her," Dad said, lacing his hand behind his head and leaning back in his chair. "Doesn't she sound good?"

"Great," Mom exclaimed.

Neil just had to stare at them. Did they have any idea how stupid they sounded? And how embarrassed they were making him feel?

An explanation drifted at the edge of sanity.

Clues and hints and the very odd expressions from these very odd parents could be pieced together, giving Neil an idea that made him snort and shake his head defiantly. No, he wouldn't believe that. No, no, no!

"What's the matter?" Mom asked, dropping a third piece of French toast onto his syrup-encrusted plate.

"Nothing's wrong," he told her.

"You're right," she sang out, giving her son a fond pat on the back.

Which made it all the harder to say nothing. Neil glanced at her, then realized that he was sneering. So he looked down the dining room table, pleased to see that he wasn't the only one noticing this bullshit. Hannah fidgeted as her dad insisted on giving her another big hug. Jake Shepherd

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told his mom to please stop staring at him, please. Only the Hawthorne kids seemed comfortable with this crazy mood. They asked the adults for more French toast and more milk, even though they hadn't finished their first helpings. Then Claudia saw her mother staggering downstairs, and with a bullying voice, she said, "Mommy, my syrup's cold. Can you warm it up for me?"

Makeup was plastered thick on the woman's face. Mrs. Hawthorne walked over to her daughter and yanked her plate away, never looking at her or saying a word.

"In an hour," Collin announced, "I'm going swimming." He was already wearing his swimsuit. "I'm going out to the float and back again. Twenty times."

The adults became quiet and watchful.

Hannah pointed out, "That's a lot of times."

Neil didn't feel hungry anymore. He was sorry for accepting more toast, because now it was destined for the disposal.

The microwave beeped. Then Mrs. Hawthorne returned, carrying Claudia's plate with a dishrag.

The girl took a bite, then said, "Ugh! It's too hot now."

Her mother stared at the plate. Only at the plate.

"This isn't what I wanted," Claudia complained. "I can't even put it in my mouth."

Her brother said, "Chicken fights. I want to chicken fight."

The Jensens finally stopped tickling their daughter. They glanced at the other parents, meaningful looks exchanged in rapid succession.

"And a boat ride," Collin proposed. "Dad? Dad? Can you pull an innertube with our boat? And can I ride it, maybe?"

For a flickering moment, that sounded like fun to Neil.

"Not today, son. No." Mr. Hawthorne had cooked their breakfast, and he'd just wandered into the dining room to measure the remaining hunger. He was wearing an apron and a hard face, keeping his emotions in control. He looked sad and angry, but he wouldn't show anyone why or at whom. Yet the anger was in his voice, every word stiff and slow as he told Collin, "We aren't doing anything like that today."

"Anything like what?" Neil muttered.

Mr. Hawthorne rubbed his hands in the apron. Then to everyone at

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the table, he said, "We aren't going into the water today. We can do anything but that."

Mrs. Miller said, "Anything," with emphasis. "Like, maybe we can go see a movie. Isn't there a theater down in — ?"

"Absolutely," said Dr. Shepherd. "Or we can rent a stack of movies."

Neil was picturing himself straddling an innertube being towed by the pontoon boat. It wasn't a Jetski, but it could be fun. For a little while. Plus it would happen outdoors, and wasn't that why people came to places like this? To be out on the water?

"No swimming at all?" asked one of the Shepherd boys.

"Not for us," said Mrs. Jensen, ignoring the frowns building on her triplets' faces. "Not today, we won't. No, thank you."

"You've all had too much sun," Mr. Miller blurted.

Nobody was burned. Neil could see that for himself.

"But you can have anything else," Mr. Hawthorne repeated. "What do you kids want? Name it. Anything!"

"A horse," Claudia called out.

That brought a sudden, unnerved silence.

The girl didn't care. She stared at her mother, and with a gushing, hopeful voice, she said, "A real horse. A thoroughbred. Can we go get one? There's a stable just down — "

"No horses," her father warned her. "We've told you."

"But you just said, 'Anything...'!"

Neil's father stepped forward, waving his arms to get everyone's attention. Then he almost shouted, "Guys? We decided last night." His voice was a mixture of conviction and desperation. "For today," he told them, "and for a lot of good reasons, we're not going anywhere near the lake."

Someone had to ask the question.

"What reasons?" Neil pressed.

Dad seemed disappointed to hear those words. But before he could summon up a lame excuse, Claudia interrupted, her shrill and cutting voice saying, "I'm tired of my pony. I want a real horse!"

Her mother descended on her, pulling away the French toast and shouting, "No. We're not going to spoil you anymore. No!"

A perplexed and embarrassed look swept across the girl's face. Then

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anger flickered, found its heat, and she gathered herself, letting loose a rain of tears.

"And no more tantrums, young lady! Do you hear me?"

Which made Claudia even louder, the wail rising like a tornado siren before it finally collapsed into gut-born sobs.

Mr. Hawthorne stared at his wife, saying, "Darling, I don't know — "

"What? What?" Mrs. Hawthorne was crying and screaming, using the plate as a prop, flinging it back and forth as she asked everyone, "Am I being unreasonable here?" Then she dropped the plate in front of Claudia, buying the girl's silence with its crash. "Oh, things are changing now. Are you listening to me, young lady? I don't want a spoiled, self-centered daughter who can't say two nice words to her mother when she's an adult — !"

Incredibly, Dr. Shepherd told her children, "You didn't hear that."

Neil looked at his own parents; they struggled to avoid his gaze.

Claudia shrank down, sobbed lightly, then halfway fell out of her chair, doing a fat-girl sprint into the living room and dropping onto the sofa, letting everyone watch as she kicked and wept into the brown afghan.

Finally, Dad gave Neil a half-hearted glance.

"What happened last night?" Neil asked him. Asked everyone. Then before anyone could hammer together a lie, he added, "And don't tell me we came back through time to visit you! Because that's not possible. And even if it was possible...I wouldn't do it, not in trillion damned years...!"

The only sound was Claudia weeping, and even that had lost its vigor.

Then Mr. Jensen asked, "But what if, Neil? What if coming here was the decent, right thing to do?" He pulled a hand through his matted hair, then to underscore his question, he gave his daughter a little kiss on her embarrassed forehead, adding, "What if by doing that you were accomplishing one enormous and very good thing?"

Neil was angry in too many ways to count, and for reasons he couldn't even name. He sat on a toy bench inside the playroom, pretending to watch over the kids. But nobody seemed to be doing much of anything, even quarreling. Like Neil, the kids were keeping quiet, listening carefully, little snatches of their parents' conversations managing to find their way in from the living room.

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"What did you think? First, I mean."

"Quiet."

"First," he said again. Mr. Miller asked the question. "When you saw them?"

"I didn't believe it," Dr. Shepherd muttered.

"I didn't believe them," said Mom, with conviction.

"They can't hear us," someone promised. Mrs. Miller?

Then Dad said, "What I guessed? It was you, Bill." Bill was Mr. Jensen. "I mean, since it was your game. You invented it. So I just assumed that you'd hired actors, probably weeks ago. Coached them and made them wait for a signal, and it was all just — "

"A practical joke," Mom interrupted.

"A setup," said a man. Which man?

Then Mrs. Jensen whispered a name, then started to ask, "When you heard about her, did you still think — ?"

"Exactly," Mom blurted. "Not a joke, no."

Several voices chanted, "No," in the same moment.

Then a man said, "Keep it down," and the conversation evaporated into a hushed murmur.

Hannah left the kids to sit beside Neil and hear better. But there was nothing to be heard, and finally she whispered, "What do you think?" She stared at Neil, her legs crossed hard and both hands on her high knee, her body slumped forward as if she was trying to make herself tiny. "What?"

"It didn't happen," he told her.

"What didn't?" She was a smart girl. It showed in her face and particularly in her bright eyes, and she was older than eight in her voice. But she was still just a kid, and she hadn't put things together. "I don't understand," she admitted, without shame. "Who came to see them last night?"

"Nobody did," Neil told her.

The other kids were sitting on the floor, toys scattered around them or held by indifferent hands, every eye focused squarely on Neil.

"They got drunk," he growled. "They don't know what they saw."

But his audience couldn't embrace that answer, either. They sighed and returned to their lazy playing, and Hannah moved closer to Neil, trying to listen again. They were sitting in the same twisted position,

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heads as close to the doorway as possible, both hearing Hannah's mother ask someone, "Now whose moon is that?"

Dad said, "Saturn's."

But then Mr. Jensen said, "No. It's Neptune's."

"Which one lives there?" asked a man. Mr. Shepherd, was it?

Someone whispered an answer. But it was said so softly that Neil couldn't decipher the name, or if it was a name. Although didn't it sound a lot like his father's quietest voice? And maybe he hadn't said a name, but instead, he simply offered, "Mine."

Mr. Miller said, "Oh, I'd never live out there. I don't suffer the cold well."

The adults laughed for a moment, then fell silent.

Neil could hear Hannah breathing. He wished that she wasn't sitting this close, but he didn't say anything, and glancing at her, he noticed that she had her mother's face. In a kid sort-of way, she was pretty.

Someone mumbled a question.

And Dad repeated it. "Yeah. Why aren't they worried about changing the big stuff? Like history. Did anyone ask anyone?"

"I asked," Mr. Jensen volunteered.

"And?" someone prompted him.

"It has to do with quantum mechanics," the man replied.

Hannah asked, "What's that? Want-um mechanics?"

Neil placed his finger to his lips, listening hard now. But he couldn't hear half of the words — not near enough to make sense of things — which was why he stood and crept into the doorway, careful to keep just out of sight.

"Move through time," Mr. Jensen was explaining, "and you cause the universe to divide. To split. It's something that happens regardless of the direction you happen to be traveling. Whether it's backward in time, or like us, moving ahead at our snail's pace."

"What does all that mean?" Mrs. Miller asked with a tight, frustrated tone.

"I turn right, or I turn left," Mr. Jensen explained. "Or I walk straight ahead. These are the sorts of decisions that each of us makes every day. Easily, and effortlessly. But when I turn right, there's another version of me who turns left. And a third that keeps walking straight ahead, bumping into the wall. You see? The quantum universe is vast in ways we can't

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perceive. Everything that can happen, does. It's just that in our particular version of the universe, a single string of events is the story."

That brought a puzzled, perfect silence.

Mr. Jensen continued. "The universe has an infinite number of Earths, each with its own unique history. And it's possible — from what they said, it's even easy — to move backward in time. So when you arrive at some past Earth, what you're doing is causing that Earth to split again. I turn left. I turn right. I walk straight. Or — I come to a halt because suddenly I've got a time traveler standing in my path...."

"I still don't get it," Mrs. Hawthorne growled. She was still angry and sad, using the loudest voice of any adult. "You don't make much sense, Bill."

"It's hard to grasp," Mr. Jensen agreed. "And I'm pretty much exhausted, too."

There was more whispering, in the living room and behind Neil.

Then Mr. Jensen continued, saying, "What would have happened is still happening. But not in this universe. Not to us." Then after a brief pause, he said, "And not to my daughter, thankfully."

A murmur of approval fell into silence.

Then Mom asked, "So why aren't these visitors everywhere? If traveling is so easy, and all — ?"

"It's easy," Mr. Jensen agreed, "but it's also unlikely. I mean, well...what are the odds that one of us will visit a certain tropical beach during our lifetimes? Vanishingly small. And besides, when a traveler arrives somewhere — somewhen — he doesn't erase the old timeline. It's still there. He's just adding a new complication. One complication among trillions of complications."

"Complications," growled Mrs. Hawthorne.

"Anyway," said Dad.

Then the adults were talking at the same time, quietly and quickly, their words smeared together into a tired but excited tangle of sounds.

Neil started to step back, kicking Hannah in the shin.

She was directly behind him. And almost every other kid was crowded behind her, standing and kneeling, listening hard to words that couldn't make any sense. But isn't that how it was when you're a kid? Nothing makes sense, but you can't help yourself. You listen to the adults, waiting for anything that you can remember and use.

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Neil looked at their faces, at the eyes staring up at him, and he wished they would just go away. But then a thought hit him. He took a little breath and smiled, and he whispered, "Okay. Tell me, guys. What do you want to do today?"

Claudia answered first. She was sitting alone in the middle of the playroom, dressing soldiers in doll clothes. Without looking up, she snapped, "I want to swim."

"Shush," Hannah told her.

Neil herded everyone far back into the room. "Is that what you want? To go down to the water?"

They nodded and said, "Yes," with loud, impatient whispers.

Then he said, "Okay," and looked at the bare white wall for a moment, deciding how it could be done. "Okay," he said again, louder this time. And he kneeled down low, making sure that everyone was listening when he said, "This is how we're going to do it."

THE ADULTS SAT limp in the chairs and sofas, looking sick and exhausted. But most were smiling like people whose faces were stuck in that position. The Hawthornes were the exception. They couldn't stop being angry about whatever had happened last night. Which had never happened, Neil reminded himself. He still didn't believe any of this crap, and he wouldn't ever, and that thought helped him find a voice that was strong and certain, and believeable.

"They want to go out front and play," Neil reported. "I'll watch them. If you want."

"Out front?" Mrs. Hawthorne snapped.

Then he remembered. "In the back yard, I mean." The front yard was beside the deep, dangerous lake. "They want to play on the swings and in the sandbox. If that's okay with you guys."

"It's all right with me," said Dad, laughing to himself.

Mom was half-asleep. Every adult seemed ready to drift away, except for Mr. Jensen and Mrs. Miller. He was probably still explaining time travel to her, and she was waiting eagerly for the boy to leave them alone again.

"Just keep them in the back yard," Mr. Hawthorne barked.

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Neil looked at him, saying, "I will. Sir."

"If you get in trouble — " Dad began.

But Neil was already leaving, slipping back into the playroom and giving the kids a big nod and wink. "Like we talked about," he said. "Be quiet, and quick."

They went out the main door, out onto the hot new driveway, then slipped through the split-rail fence into the adjacent yards. Neil led the way while Hannah stayed at the back. A private sidewalk ran between the next two overgrown cabins. The kids kept a trespasser's silence as they slipped between the buildings. Then they used a narrow path running back along the high ground between the cabins and the big lake, everyone shrinking down low for the last little ways, reaching the boathouse stairs without being noticed.

Their swimsuits were still damp and sandy from yesterday's fun. They dressed in shifts, then ran down the last long stretch of stairs. The lake was vast and brilliant, stirred by a thousand fast boats. An infectious fun erased the last traces of guilt. It was easy to jump into the water and paddle where you wanted, forgetting about parents and their odd commands. But first Neil barked at the others, telling them to put on their life jackets. "Keep together, and stay in the shallows," he demanded. Then looking straight at Claudia, he added, "And unless you're dying, don't scream for help!"

Neil didn't bother with a life jacket. He plunged in feet-first, letting the warm water pull him under, and he popped up kicking and laughing, half a dozen hands grabbing him from behind, half a dozen kids trying to climb on his back at once.

"Chicken fights!" Collin called out.

But Neil was the only one big enough to carry anyone, and what was the point? No chicken fights for now, he argued. Which was how the grabbing became a game in its own right. Suddenly every kid was chasing him around the shallows, little hands clinging to his shoulders and elbows and around his waist. Sharp nails left him cut and bleeding. But nothing hurt too badly. It was fun, everyone laughing as he slowly, laboriously pulled them along. Then Neil would take a big gulp of air and dive, twisting to shake off his pursuers, and after a good long swim above the weedy bottoms, he would surface again, his lungs burning for the next few

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breaths, barely having enough time to recover before the kids again descended on him.

One time he came up too close to the others. The Jensen girl — wiry little Barbie — instantly threw her arms around his neck. The others grabbed her and held tight. Yesterday's pain returned, but Neil mostly ignored it, bending forward and pumping with his legs, towing five or six kids into deeper water. Then he dove, and Barbie almost let go. Almost. But she managed to put her second arm around his neck, squeezing and locking her hands together, forcing Neil back up to the surface, forcing him to take a quick breath before diving deeper than before, kicking and twisting and the girl still holding onto him, a frantic strength making her arms feel like bands of warm iron.

Neil finally used his hands. It was like cheating, taking hold of her little arms and giving them a jerk, then another. Then he twisted and tugged a third time, and Barbie was gone, and he swam another few yards underwater, coming up in water too deep to stand in, using the last of his strength to stay afloat while he breathed in quick, useless gasps.

Someone swam up to him, and he ducked instinctively.

Then the kid was past, and he came up to find several kids happily swimming toward the end of the dock, their little orange jackets keeping them high in the bright chopping water. Where were they going? Toward the floating platform, he realized. Everyone was breaking his first rule. "You're suppose to stay in the shallows!" he cried out. "Hey, guys! Guys! Listen to me!"

Nobody heard him over their own laughing and the whine of outboard motors. Or maybe they heard him fine and didn't care.

Either way, Neil was furious. He broke into a steady freestyle, trying to catch them before they got past the end of the dock. But he was tired, and he kept swimming crooked, and all of those idiot kids were at the float when he finally reached them. "Hey!" he barked. "Who said you could come out here?"

"I said so," Claudia reported. Then she made a show of climbing the little ladder and dropping onto the platform's green carpet.

Neil was too tired to scream.

The other kids climbed the ladder or held onto the algae-painted sides, and desperate to rest, Neil used the ladder, almost staggering when his full

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weight was out of the water. There was no place to sit, much less lie down. So he stood in the middle of their little square island, and after a minute of panting, he thought to count heads.

They were one short, he realized.

"Who's missing?" he asked, looking at Hannah first. But he already knew who wasn't here, and right away, he told the eight-year-old, "You were suppose to watch her!"

"Who?" the eight-year-old asked.

"Barbie. Where is she?"

The stubborn happiness refused to give way to serious thoughts. Instead, the kids giggled, and Collin pointed out, "She was riding you, when I saw her."

A chill took hold of Neil. Standing tall, he looked toward the shoreline, finally asking himself how that little girl had stayed with him underwater. She'd removed her life jacket or it had come loose. And that's when he remembered what the jacket looked like. It was an old-fashioned pillowy kind, orange but stained by years of hard use. And then he saw the jacket sitting against the beach, the wakes of the passing boats pushing it a little higher with each sloppy wave.

"Stay here!" he roared.

Some little turd happily said, "We will," and broke into a big laugh.

Neil hit the water swimming. He was trying to remember where he was when he was wrestling with the girl, and when he was halfway certain that he was in the right place, he dove and started hunting for anything like limbs and a body. But he couldn't see far in that green water. Not without a face mask, he couldn't. So after a couple useless dives, he surfaced and climbed up onto the dock, feeling exhausted and terrified and sad and miserable. Where were the goggles? In the pontoon boat, he decided. And he found them under a pile of wet towels, but it took forever, and suddenly he was thinking that maybe he should run up to the cabin now and tell them what had happened. He should find help. Which was the first thing that he should have done, he realized, taking the wooden steps two at a time.

Voices descended on him.

Someone muttered something harsh, and there was crying, and Neil stopped and looked up the long staircase, watching as his parents came

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down fast now, followed by the Jensens, and between them, sobbing hard, their little daughter.

Neil sagged against the railing, relieved.

Then Dad said, "Mister," to him. Which was what he always said when Neil was in the deepest shit. "Mister." What you usually call an adult who's worthy of your respect.

"You had no right," his folks told him. "None."

Probably not. But Neil had to clamp his mouth shut, putting on a brave face before muttering, "Everyone's fine."

"Not because of you," Mr. Hawthorne pointed out.

Dad said, "Matt," to Mr. Hawthorne. There was a warning in the name. Then he turned back to Neil, saying, "We gave you orders, and you disobeyed them."

Neil was standing at the end of the dock. The kids had been herded back out of the water, and now they were climbing the stairs with the best sluggish gait they could manage. Neil was the danger here. The sparkplug to the rebellion. That much had been decided, and before things got worse, the adults had to put a stop to his evil ways.

"Neil," said Mr. Jensen, his voice more forced then friendly. "This is the situation. I know I'm not suppose to tell you this, but you see, we had some very odd visitors last night, and they stayed the night, and they said...well, quite a bit. More than they intended to say, I'd guess."

Neil showed them a glowering face.

"My daughter would have drowned today," Mrs. Jensen blurted. "But these visitors came back to warn us — "

"I didn't warn you," Neil growled.

Mom took him by an elbow, ready to tell him otherwise.

So he said, "I did not warn you," with a slow, precise voice. Could they understand what he was telling them? "I was asleep. In bed, and asleep."

"You're right," Mrs. Miller agreed, trying to smile at him. "It wasn't you. But it was you, and them, from a very distant future — "

"No," he snapped.

Mom said, "Honey," and tried to take the elbow again.

But he shook her off, telling her, "Don't do that."

"You have a wondrous future," Mr. Jensen told him. "If you're careful

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and can live long enough, Neil...well, there's just nothing that you can't achieve in your very long life...."

"Think of it," Dad told him.

Why was this so awful? Neil was almost shaking because he felt so sick and nervous. So deeply and enormously scared of everything.

"You aren't suppose to know that much," Mrs. Miller admitted. Then she touched him on the shoulder, and again, she made herself smile. "But you deserve to know. You're old enough." The smile seemed to grow warmer. Fonder, and genuine. "Ask us anything. If you promise to keep what you hear a secret, we'll tell you what they told us."

"You deserve to know," Mom assured him.

"To understand," Dad added.

"Anything," Mrs. Miller repeated, now pushing up beside him, giving the boy a rough little hug around the shoulders.

With an astonishing ease, Neil pushed her away.

Then he turned, and with the adults calling out his name, he dove off the end of the dock, hitting the lake with a good flat *slap* and breaking into a strong freestyle, his head down except when he breathed, arms working and his tired legs kicking, carrying him past the floating platform and out into the open lake itself.

He swam until he felt breathless, then after a few deep gasps, he swam out even farther. A chill reached up from the deep water. The air around him was being torn by the high, angry whine of motors. The knife-like prows and keels crossed in front of him and behind. A flock of Jetskis were somewhere nearby, hitting the high waves with a delicious wet thud. He couldn't see anyone chasing after him, nor did he bother to look. All that mattered was the swirling bright water, chaotic and vast. All that Neil wanted was to keep his limbs moving, keep himself swimming alone, working his way across this enormous lake that still, even now, he couldn't quite believe in.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Astronomy, by Rick Wadholm, ElectricStory.com, 2001, $4.99.

Numbers Don't Lie, by Terry Bisson, ElectricStory.com, 2001, $4.99.

Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories, by Terry Bisson, Electric Story.com, 2001, $7.99.

Unicorn Mountain, by Michael Bishop, ElectricStory.com, 2000, $7.99.

E-book versions, downloadable from www.ElectricStory.com.

FOR THE PAST couple of years I've been having an ongoing debate with friends and acquaintances concerning the issues, pro and con, of e-books. Most fall into the con camp. They speak of the tactile intimacy of holding a book and turning its pages (which I enjoy as well). They complain that looking at a screen too long bothers their eyes (hasn't been a problem for me to date). And those are the ones who have actually tried it.

The greater percentage simply can't imagine doing it in the first place.

I agree with them when it comes to reading at my desktop computer. Perhaps it's because, as so many others do in this day and age, I already spend far too much time in front of my computer every day. I don't have the patience to read pixelated books on the screen in my leisure time. It just doesn't translate into a relaxing experience.

But reading from a portable device (Palm Pilot, Visor, or those machines that operate with a Pocket PC/Windows CE operating system) is a different story, and interestingly enough, all the pro e-book folks I know own such devices and love to read on them, myself included. They're as portable as a book

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and you can curl up with one in the same chair you'd curl up in to read the original portable reading device of pages held together in between a front and back cover.

Now I'm not suggesting that you go out and buy such a device simply to read books on them (although there are those like the Rocketbook that do just that), but if you're already using the organizational benefits of a palm-sized computer, I do recommend you try reading a book on it. You'll probably be pleasantly surprised. Besides their convenience (just pull it out when you're waiting in a line at the supermarket or waiting in a doctor's office), the devices are also great for trips as you can carry as many books on it as your device has the memory to hold. It doesn't matter if you're carrying around one book or twenty—the bulk and weight remains the same. You'll never be stuck again without something to read, and there are more and more titles appearing every day.

Unfortunately, the e-book publishers don't all seem to have the concept of portability and convenience for their readers down just yet — understandable, perhaps, since no one really knows where e-publishing is going to take us in the future. There are still too many publishers that provide books in formats that can only be read on a desktop computer. Or they publish for a particular device, rather than formatting their material to work on a variety of them.

ElectricStory.com hopes to remedy this. At the moment, besides the desktop versions that they sell, their books are available in formats for Gemstar ReB 1100 and 1200 handheld devices (formerly the Rocket eBook and Softbook Reader, respectively) and for Microsoft Reader software, although not all Pocket PC devices can read them. The publisher tells me that Reader 2.0 for Win CE devices, due out this summer, should fix this. None of that helps owners using the Palm operating system, though, and there are millions of them.

Still, the prices are fair, or at least comparable with printed book prices, and I decided to look at a couple of new titles from their catalogue, and a couple of backlist ones.

Rick Wadholm's *Astronomy* is a Cthulhu Mythos story set at the end of WWII. It plays on the idea that Hitler was trying to win the war using occult forces, except it turns out his scientists and occultists were attempting to raise the Old Gods. Even with the war ended,

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the threat presented by some of the Nazi loyalists remains.

Enter Susan Gilbert, retired from U.S. Naval Intelligence, but brought back to help out because she's an expert in the field. Except being an expert doesn't guarantee anyone's survival in times such as these.

It's been years since I've read fiction based on Lovecraft's mythos — even longer since I've read Lovecraft himself. I remember the original material as wordy but nevertheless fascinating.

Wadholm writes with a much crisper prose style than Lovecraft and some of his devotees, but he plays fair in his use of the mythos, without falling into caricature or excessive melodrama. Some readers might miss the ornate flow of words that was Lovecraft's gift and sometimes also his failing, but I didn't.

Astronomy has the slick fast pace of a contemporary thriller, for all its WWII setting, and I liked it for that. If I were to register a complaint, it would be that the characters weren't as fully rounded as I'd have liked them to be, but in the context of this story, they were perfectly suitable.

Numbers Don't Lie by Terry Bisson is a short collection of his three Wilson Wu novelets, which are stories in a contemporary setting based on quantum physics. It's fascinating stuff, from the junkyard with its door that opens onto the Moon, in the first story, to the last one where connective time (the time it takes for one to get from one place to another, such as on a subway or airplane) is being stolen to create a pocket universe. Wu is a strong presence in each story, but they're told from the viewpoint of a divorced lawyer entering a new relationship — which allows Wu to maintain his unique presence, a kind of contemporary Doc Savage, without the action.

Unlike *Bears Discover Fire*, the other Bisson title I tried, this fiction has never been collected before and, in fact, it reads more like a novel, divided into three separate stand-alone but connected parts, than it does a collection.

Bears Discover Fire gathers together a number of my favorite Bisson stories. The title story alone is worth the price of admission, especially the opening scene: Bobby, his brother Wallace, and his nephew Wallace Jr. are fixing a flat tire at night on an interstate. The flashlight keeps dying, but suddenly there's light being cast on the work area. The three look up to see two

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bears at the edge of the woods, holding the torches that are casting the light. They quickly finish changing the tire, then drive off. That's when Wallace turns to Bobby, and drawls, "Looks like bears have discovered fire."

Of course the story is as much about Bobby's relationship with his nephew and his mother as it is the bears, but it's the way that Bisson handles the impossible that I enjoy so much. It's always so matter-of-fact, from the news broadcasters running six o'clock specials on the bears, to a child born with wings, a bank machine that seems to know more about its users than should be possible, a blind painter creating art from near-death experiences, and the other fascinating characters and situations that are presented to us in the book.

Short fiction is really suited to the e-book format. Because a handheld device is small enough to fit in a pocket or purse, it's readily available when you have a spare ten or fifteen minutes available to do some reading, and I can see a strong future for collections and magazines in this format, if the material becomes readily available to readers.

Which isn't to say that novels don't work as well — either new or old ones. The difference, as with regular books, is that instead of getting to read a complete story in the fifteen minutes of spare time, you read a chapter or two. Though naturally, if you have the time, you can also find yourself caught up in the story and missing a meeting or going to bed far later than you'd planned.

Rereading Michael Bishop's *Unicorn Mountain* was just as moving an experience for me as it was the first time I read it in regular book form.

Unicorn Mountain isn't so much about unicorns as it is about some very real contemporary issues, such as AIDS and the reactions to it by both the victims and those around the victim. Or the complex and changing face of Native Americans. Or how about relationships — between estranged couples, or siblings, or parents and children?

Briefly put, Libby Quarrels and her ranch hand Sam Coldpony are trying to make a go of their Colorado ranch that Libby won in a settlement from her ex. Enter her ex's cousin Bo Gavin, dying of AIDS. Now Libby has the ranch and Bo to worry about; Sam is coming to grips with his own heritage and the uncomfortable realization that he was wrong to desert his daughter, now

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sixteen and becoming a novice shaman, when he left his wife; and Bo is dying.

Bishop's novel is about all of that, but it also has unicorns. They remain otherworldly creatures, a kind of metaphor for the wonder that lies at the heart of the world, the wonder that all the characters are trying to connect with in their own way. Unfortunately, the unicorns are dying of a disease that in some ways is very similar to AIDS.

Unicorn Mountain is one of those classic novels that completely fulfills the potential of our genre — the reason we read in it in the first place: deeply moving stories that are both entertaining and thought-provoking. What's especially good about this book is that while Bishop is unabashedly embracing one of the most outworn images of fantasy, he has imbued it with an appeal that is at once timeless and fresh. He's doing what the best writers do, taking something commonplace or stereotyped and allowing us to see it again through fresh eyes. Bishop can write books that annoy me (*Who Made Stevie Crye?* comes immediately to mind), but he has also written some of the best in the field, of which this is a prime example. And I think it's the sign of a good writer when he or she either makes you adore their work, or become infuriated with it — sometimes in the same book. They make you feel *something*, a reaction that can sometimes be all too rare in literature.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

Mars Crossing, by Geoffrey A. Landis, Tor, 2000, $24.95.

Ceres Storm, by David Herter, Tor, 2000, $22.95.

The Ill-Made Mute, by Cecilia Dart-Thornton, Warner Books, May 2001, $24.95.

Fools Errant, by Matthew Hughes, Warner Books, 2001, $6.99.

Ordinary Horror, by David Searcy, Viking, 2001, $24.95.

The Hell Screens, by Alvin Lu, Four Walls Eight Windows, 2000, $22.

THE WORLD of fantastic fiction exists as a dozen or so city-states scattered about the landscape. Independent, isolate, each largely boasting its own language and customs, they're sometimes at war, other times at querulous peace, barbarians forever at one border, forces of a greater civilization at another.

A truism to say that discussion is limited by the language we have available to us (even if in doing so we are paraphrasing Wittgenstein), but one of the difficulties resides in vocabulary. However good we are at coloring, if we don't have lines, we can't stay inside them. In a genre encompassing heroic fantasy, extrapolative futuristic fiction, space opera, mimetic stories with just a touch of strange, ghost tales, horror, magic realism, and freewheeling whimsy, baby and bathwater may start looking much the same. As Augustine said of time: I know well enough what it is, provided nobody asks me.

I say tomato, you say speculative fiction.

Whatever it is we're talking about, we know where to find it in the bookstores. It's right over there, by the children's section and

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self-help books. The grownups are eating at the big table.

Our old friend Karl Marx, as he blew dust off long-unread volumes at the British Library and went down on knees to play horse for his daughter, never imagined he might be writing about publishing, but he was right: capitalism leads inevitably to centralization and monopoly. No one contests that popular literature is market-driven. In the past, however, publishers at least claimed that bestsellers allowed them leeway to bring out works of merit they realized would have a limited audience, an argument that seems now to have gone the way of passenger pigeons and Edsels.

Do those market forces leading to centralization and monopoly also press the work itself towards an essential sameness, seeking always the familiar, the brand name, comforting tastes — the safe?

What, in a world of ever-fewer publishers, a world in which many books go out of print within months, in which series and massive trilogies seem the norm, a world in which three avatars of *Star Trek* occupy the TV screen like so many Lucille Ball vehicles, has become of science fiction, of fantastic literature as a whole?

The idea here is simple enough: read through a representative sample of first novels to see what the crop might have to tell us about the current state of the art. What the genre has come to, where it might be going. First novels notoriously fail to get noticed, shunted onto side tracks to wait for engines that never arrive. Yet what, in a genre so given (as it claims) to innovation, invention, and *newness*, could be more important than new writers, fresh voices, novel visions?

One editor of a major sf line, queried for this column, responded: We have no first novels coming up which, I guess, says something about the state of things. Meanwhile a small army of self-publishing authors flew over, dropping e-mails with a penchant for terms like *gut-wrenching, in your face, heart-pounding*. Soon I sat surrounded by novels in which Robert E. Howard and H. P. Lovecraft take to the road to fight evil; novels which derive not from other books but from TV shows like *Babylon 5*; revisionist versions of *Frankenstein*; gaily bedight epics of interstellar war or mock-Medieval intrigue. Had I, like Dante, come to myself in a dark wood where the way was lost? The Dutchman and I sat long over the campfire cradling bowls of warm mead in cupped hands, talking.

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On the desk before me now: the first novel of a man well known in the science fiction community, who has won several awards for short stories; a far-future tale immensely promising yet so difficult and marginally commercial that its editor has to be congratulated; the initial volume of a trilogy from a remarkably accomplished Australian fantasist; a wonderful, off-the-wall comic fantasy; a novel of suburban hell reminiscent of Matheson and Beaumont; an extraordinary novel of ghosts and liminal existence by a young Chinese-American.

Geoffrey A. Landis, NASA scientist and recipient of Nebula and Hugo awards for stories like "A Walk in the Sun" and "Ripples in the Dirac Sea," now debuts with his first novel, *Mars Crossing*. What he's given us is an edge-of-the-seat adventure story on the order of Beryl Bainbridge's *The Birthday Boys* or *Into Thin Air*, the account of 1996's Mount Everest disaster. A hastily mounted third expedition to Mars — two previous missions have lost all hands — goes almost immediately awry. One crew member is dead, the fuel supply built up over the years by the *Dulcinea* is lost, rendering the *Don Quijote* useless, and the expeditioners' only chance is a desperate one: to strike out for the Martian North Pole, where, just possibly, the first expedition's ship may prove still fueled and flightworthy.

There's a wonderful demythologization at work here. The first Mars expedition succumbs to athlete's foot, which, lacking the natural bacteria to keep it in check, grows wildly in clothes, air filters, circuit boards. Or this: "Space exploration conjures up in the imagination an image of endless horizons, infinite vistas of space. The reality, however, is quite different.... The cabin of the *Don Quijote* could best be described as a prison cell, but with less of a view." Landis never lets us forget that technology is no less fragile than the human beings who shrug it on like a protective shell.

He tells his story cleanly, stacking up charged scenes and ever-mounting challenges in chapters for the most part brief, with quick cuts from character to character and scene to scene. This is diverting at first, nervous-making, but with time the reader acclimates. The same is true of sometimes ponderous forebodings and clumsy narrative strategies. (At one point the captain thinks to himself: "As commander,

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the other five crewmembers depended on him to get the mission done safely and bring them back home. He had better get working." A sentence in shoes too big — as unwieldy as it is agrammatical.)

While certainly interesting enough, Landis's characters never quite come alive or register quite true. His approach is reductive, so that too often they're rendered as little more than their quirks: this one out for revenge, this one living a lie, this one.... I found myself longing to know what they were eating. And to hear from one of them just how badly those suits stank.

Ceres Storm by David Herter is a different beast. Herter goes for high stakes, hauling the pole way up before he jumps, setting himself the all-but-impossible goal of depicting a futuristic, alien society wholly from within. No discursive passages, no editorialization: you move through the story, perceive the events of the story, as a participant. The kind of thing Cordwainer Smith, Jack Vance, and Gene Wolfe do so well and few others attempt.

Young Daric, apparently one of several clones of Darius who long ago ruled a vast interstellar empire, has grown up in the hinterlands of Mars. Sent on a mysterious chore to a city overseen by the KayTee Clan, Daric is given a drink that engenders in him a drive to save Mars from the storms that (perhaps spawned by Darius himself) ravaged much of the inner solar system. Short upon this revelation follow voyages to Earth, to an inhabited asteriod, to Triton, and to Pluto's moon Charon as Daric, bewildered, given equivocal guidance by a small legion of artificial intelligences and twilight beings, pursues his destiny.

The novel makes few concessions to the reader, and initially proves difficult going. Orientation comes slowly; even at book's end many mysteries remain. What at first seems magic is technology, we understand that, but what are weeforms? century roses? shades? And who or what are those ghostly Eidolons?

One supposes that future volumes may resolve much of this. Still, while wondering, one would hate to lose that strangeness, that magic — yes, that wonder.

Quite early on in *The Ill-Made Mute* we come across the line "Between the mortar of daily drudgery and the pestle of pain, life went grinding on," appropriate words for

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a fantasy novel in which the physical world is almost unbearably real. This is a generously conceived, gorgeously written novel, recalling to mind the wonder we encountered upon first reading books such as Tolkein's or Mervyn Peake's, boasting a depth and acuity of texture seldom encountered. Think of all those films of medieval life, how poorly they represent quotidian life, the smells, the damp of those castles, the meat gone rotten and circled by flies but still eaten. Cecilia Dart-Thornton skirts none of that. Even its vocabulary signals the novel's earnest; on a single page I encountered *demesnes, panniers, flavescent, niveous.*

The pace of the novel, too, is extraordinary, with reversals, surprises, new quests and new estimations of central characters tumbling over one another like madcap acrobats on virtually every page. People fall from turrets, great windships heave in over the tops of trees, pirates strike, treasures come to light, alliances are formed and broken, evil, changeling creatures roam the world outside, nothing is ever as it seems.

The Ill-Made Mute, we're told, is the opening volume of a trilogy, something I'd ordinarily deprecate. But the Celtic, twilight, utterly *other* world created here is so rich and strange, it *has* to go on. And it well might go on to become — the potential is manifest — one of the great fantasies.

Fools Errant is of another stripe, a novel that in many ways returns to fantasy's origins. Again, as in *Ceres Storm*, we find a young man sent out into a largely unknown world on a mysterious errand. And as in *The Ill-Made Mute*, we encounter a multitude of wonders. The book's a marvelous picaresque, bringing to mind in its political aspects Swift, in its voice Twain, in its satirical aspect Stanislaw Lem's Ion Tichy tales, and perhaps most of all, in its gentle humor and humanity, Fritz Leiber.

> "On the whole, I would prefer ignorance."
>
> "I will inform the world of your preference," said Gaskarth, "but I doubt it will lead to any significant improvements in your lot."

Matthew Hughes dips his ladle deep into the age-old stuff of folk- and tall tales and brings up a surprising long drink of cool, tasty water. Again and again, as with Westlake and De Vries, I laughed

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aloud while reading. This is a fine, funny novel, a faultless and amazing debut.

Just as we look to trailers for a clue to the nature of new movies, so do we peruse blurbs for estimations of books we're about to crack. David Searcy's first novel *Ordinary Horror* boasts a single blurb, beautifully centered on the back of its jacket. The blurb is from Russell Hoban, a fantasist little known, I suspect, among general readers, though dear to the hearts of many. Check out *Pilgermann*, for instance.

Searcy's novel comes not from a niche publisher like Tor or Warner but wrapped in a mantle of literary cachet from Viking. He's staked out the claim left behind by the great John Collier. American life is hardly what it seems; there's forever something walking beside the day besides the day. Seventy-year-old widower Frank Delabano defends the garden of his tract home with mail-ordered bromeliads. And they work. Magnificently. But then neighborhood pets begin to come up missing, unidentifiable animals are found as road kill, hordes of cicadas and grackles invade his yard. And a most peculiar smell starts up in the 'hood.

There's not a single misstep in this elegant, small book. Fine evocations of suburbia, of the small rips and tears behind which another world waits to enter our own, of the long frontier stretching between outer and inner. Does all this actually occur, or is it only Frank's loneliness and loss remaking the world in its image? Writers like Matheson and Beaumont pioneered this frontier. And the beat goes on.

Not many novels of the fantastic carry endorsements from avant-garde writers like Carole Maso, but then, with Alvin Lu's *The Hell Screens*, we're talking Four Walls Eight Windows, a publisher who started out serving up fine contemporary European literature no one else cared about and who has in recent years turned to giving us some of the finest alternative work available. Four Walls Eight Windows seems to have taken a blood oath to stand aside, apart and — unlike many others — not to be ignored. So here we get just what we'd expect: the unexpected.

Horror collects in the crawlspaces between categories considered mutually exclusive: the living and dead, the human and animal, dreams and reality. And that's the very venue in which *The Hell Screens* takes place, as Chinese-American Cheng-Ming prowls the streets,

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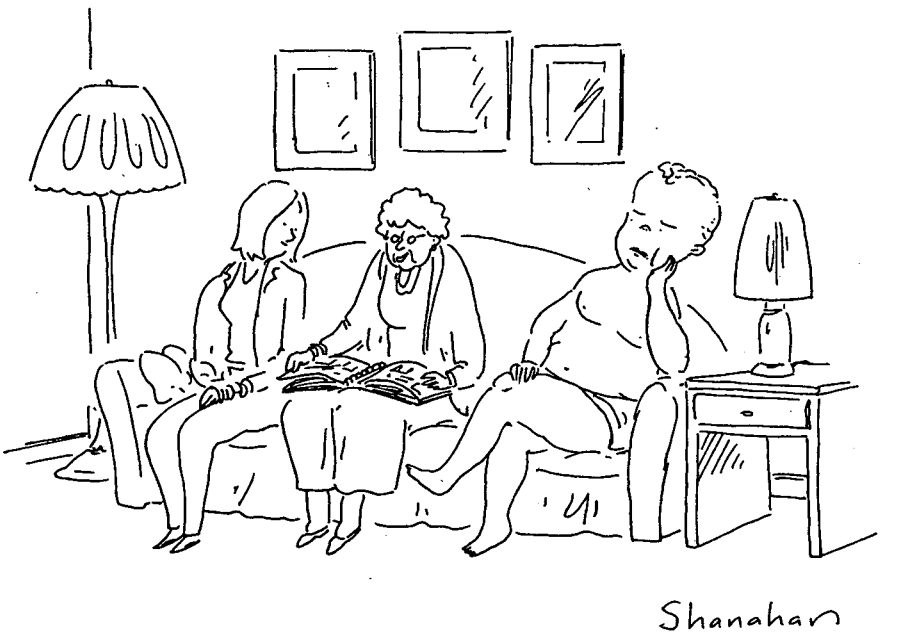
alleyways, and shadowy back halls of Taipei searching for a rapist-killer who has become something of a symbol of civilization and finding a netherworld of spirits impersonating and usurping the living. Lost somewhere between past and present, borders of self fallen, perception and imagination no longer distinguishable, his very sight co-opted, Cheng-Ming moves uneasily between realms. This is an ambitious, uneven, sometimes brilliant novel that goes about its business with admirable singlemindedness.

Six novels of varying countenance and stride, then, boding well for the continued vitality of fantastic fiction and reminding us that our selves are the locks into which the many keys of art fit, to open the sky.



"And here's a picture of Ben when he was a little baby."

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Because hard sf is so hard to write well, most of its best practitioners are branded as hard sf writers regardless of what else they publish. (When was the last time you heard someone refer to "the poet Joe Haldeman" or "the fantasist Greg Bear"?) Paul McAuley's most recent novel, The Secret of Life, *is definitely hard sf, but his previous three novels—the Confluence trilogy—were planetary romances in the vein of Gene Wolfe and Jack Vance. And his latest story for us is a work of alternate history, one that will have people referring to "the ingenious Paul McAuley."*

The Two Dicks

By Paul McAuley

PHIL IS FLYING. HE IS IN the air, and he is flying. His head full of paranoia blues, the Fear beating around him like black wings as he is borne above America.

The revelation came to him that morning. He can time it exactly: 0948, March 20, 1974. He was doing his program of exercises as recommended by his personal trainer, Mahler blasting out of the top-of-the-line stereo in the little gym he'd had made from the fifth bedroom. And in the middle of his second set of situps something goes off in his head. A terrifically bright soundless explosion of clear white light.

He's been having flashes — phosphene afterimages, blank moments of calm in his day — for about a month now, but this is the spiritual equivalent of a hydrogen bomb. His first thought is that it is a stroke. That his high blood pressure has finally killed him. But apart from a mild headache he feels perfectly fine. More than fine, in fact. Alert and fully awake and filled with a great calm.

It's as if something took control of me a long time ago, he thinks. As

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if something put the real me to sleep and allowed a constructed personality to carry on my life, and now, suddenly, I'm fully awake again. The orthomolecular vitamin diet, perhaps that did it, perhaps it really did heighten synchronous firing of the two hemispheres of my brain. I'm awake, and I'm ready to put everything in order. And without any help, he thinks. Without Emmet or Mike. That's important.

By this time he is standing at the tall window, looking down at the manicured lawn that runs out from the terrace to the shaggy hedge of flowering bougainvillaea, the twisty shapes of the cypresses. The Los Angeles sky pure and blue, washed clean by that night's rain, slashed by three white contrails to make a leaning *A*.

A for affirmation, perhaps. Or *A* for act.

The first thing, he thinks, because he thinks about it every two or three hours, because it has enraged him ever since Emmet told him about it, the very first thing I have to do is deal with the people who stole my book.

A week ago, perhaps inspired by a precursor of the clear white flash, Phil tried to get hold of a narcotics agent badge, and after a long chain of phone calls managed to get through to John Finlator, the deputy narcotics director, who advised Phil to go straight to the top. And he'd been right, Phil thinks now. If I want a fed badge, I have to get it from the Man. Get sworn in or whatever. Initiated. Then deal with the book pirates and those thought criminals in the SFWA, show them what happens when you steal a real writer's book.

It all seemed so simple in the afterglow of revelation, but Phil begins to have his first misgivings less than an hour later, in the taxi to LAX. Not about the feeling of clarity and the sudden energy it has given him, but about whether he is making the best use of it. There are things he's forgotten, like unformed words on the tip of his tongue. Things he needs to deal with, but he can't remember what they are.

He is still worrying at this, waiting in line at the check-in desk, when this bum appears right in front of him, and thrusts what seems like an unraveling baseball under Phil's nose.

It is a copy of the pirated novel: Phil's simmering anger reignites, and burns away every doubt.

It is a cheap paperback printed by some backstreet outfit in South

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Korea, the thin absorbent paper grainy with wood specks, a smudged picture of a castle silhouetted against the Japanese flag on the cover, his name far bigger than the title. Someone stole a copy of Phil's manuscript, the one he agreed to shelve, the one his publishers paid handsomely *not* to publish in one of those tricky deals Emmet is so good at. And some crook, it still isn't completely clear who, published this cheap completely illegal edition. Emmet told Phil about it a month ago, and Phil's publishers moved swiftly to get an injunction against its sale anywhere in the USA. But thousands of copies are in circulation anyway, smuggled into the country and sold clandestinely.

And the SFWA, Phil thinks, the Science Fiction Writers of America, Emmet is so right about them, the Swine Fucking Whores of Amerika, they may deny that they have anything to do with the pirate edition, but their bleatings about censorship and their insidious promotion of this blatant violation of my copyright proves they want to drag me down to their level.

Me: the greatest living American novelist. Erich Segal called me that only last month in a piece in *The New York Review of Books*; Updike joshed me about it during the round of golf we played the day after I gave that speech at Harvard. The greatest living American novelist: of course the SFWA want to claim me for their own propaganda purposes, to pump my life's blood into their dying little genre.

And now this creature has materialized before Phil, like some early version or failed species of human being, with blond hair tangled over his shoulders, a handlebar mustache, dressed in a buckskin jacket and faded blue jeans like Hollywood's idea of an Indian scout, a guitar slung over his shoulder, fraying black sneakers, or no, those were his *feet*, bare feet so filthy they looked like busted shoes. And smelling of pot smoke and powerful sweat. This aborigine, this indigent, his hand thrust toward Phil, and a copy of the stolen novel in that hand, as he says, "I love this book, man. It tells it like it is. The little men, man, that's who count, right? Little men, man, like you and me. So could you like *sign* this for me if it's no hassle...."

And Phil is seized by righteous anger and great wrath, and he smites his enemy right there, by the American Airlines First Class check-in desk. Or at least he grabs the book and tears it in half — the broken spine

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yielding easily, almost gratefully — and tells the bum to fuck off. Oh, just imagine the scene, the bum whining about his book, his property, and Phil telling the creature he doesn't deserve to read any of his books, he is *banned for life* from reading his books, and two security guards coming and hustling the bum away amid apologies to the Great American Novelist. The bum doesn't go quietly. He screams and struggles, yells that he, Phil, is a fake, a sell-out, man, the guitar clanging and chirping like a mocking grasshopper as he is wrestled away between the two burly, beetling guards.

Phil has to take a couple of Ritalin pills to calm down. To calm his blood down. Then a couple of uppers so he can face the journey.

He still has the book. Torn in half, pages frazzled by reading and rereading slipping out of it every time he opens it, so that he has to spend some considerable time sorting them into some kind of order, like a conjuror gripped by stage flop sweat in the middle of a card trick, before he can even contemplate looking at it.

Emmet said it all. What kind of commie fag organization would try to blast Phil's reputation with this cheap shot fired under radar? Circulating it on the campuses of America, poisoning the young minds who should be drinking deep clear drafts of his prose. Not this...this piece of dreck.

The Man in the High Castle. A story about an author locked in the castle of his reputation, a thinly disguised parable about his own situation, set in a parallel or alternate history where the U.S.A. lost the war and was split into two, the East governed by the Nazis, the West by the Japanese. A trifle, a silly fantasy. What had he been thinking when he wrote it? Emmet was furious when Phil sent him the manuscript. He wasted no words in telling Phil how badly he had fucked up, asking him bluntly, what the hell did he think he was doing, wasting his time with this lame sci-fi crap?

Phil had been stuck, that's what. And he's still stuck. Ten, fifteen years of writing and rewriting, two marriages made and broken while Phil works on and on at the same book, moving farther and farther away from his original idea, so far out now he thinks he might never get back. The monster doesn't even have a title. *The Long Awaited. The Brilliant New. The Great Unfinished.* Whatever. And in the midst of this mire, Phil set aside the Next Great Novel and pulled a dusty idea from his files — dating

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back to 1961, for Chrissake — and something clicked. He wrote it straight out, a return to the old days of churning out sci-fi stories for tiny amounts of money while righteously high on speed: cranked up, cranking out the pages. For a little while he was so happy: just the idea of finishing something made him happy. But Emmet made him see the error of his ways. Made him see that you can't go back and start over. Made him see the depth of his error, the terrible waste of his energy and his talent.

That was when Phil, prompted by a research paper he discovered, started on a high protein/low carbohydrate diet, started dosing himself with high levels of water soluble vitamins.

And then the pirated edition of *The Man in the High Castle* appeared, and Emmet started over with his needling recriminations and insinuations, whipping up in Phil a fine hot sweat of shame and fury.

Phil puts the thing back in his coat pocket. Leans back in his leather-upholstered First Class seat. Sips his silvery martini. The anger is still burning inside him. For the moment he has forgotten his doubts. Straight to the top, that's the only answer. Straight to the President.

After a while, he buzzes the stewardess and gets some writing paper. Takes out his gold-nibbed, platinum-cased Cross fountain pen, the pen his publishers gave him to mark the publication of the ten millionth copy of the ground-breaking, genre-busting *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*. Starts to write:

Dear Mr President: I would like to introduce myself. I am Philip K. Dick and admire and have great respect for your office. I talked to Deputy Narcotics Director Finlator last week and expressed my concern for our country....

THINGS GO smoothly, as if the light has opened some kind of path, as if it has tuned Phil's brain, eliminated all the dross and kipple clagging it. Phil flies to Washington, D. C. and immediately hires a car, a clean light blue Chrysler with less than a thousand miles on the clock, and drives straight to the White House.

Because there is no point in posting the letter. That would take days, and it might never reach the President. All Phil would get back would be

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a photograph signed by one of the autograph machines that whir ceaselessly in some White House basement....

No, the thing to do is subvert the chain of command, the established order. So Phil drives to the White House: to the White House gate. Where he gives the letter to one of the immaculately turned out Marine guards.

Because of an act of wanton piracy, Sir, the young people, the Black Panthers etc etc do not *consider me their enemy or as they call it The Establishment. Which I call America. Which I love. Sir, I can and will be of any Service that I can to help the country out. I have done an in-depth study of Drug Abuse and Communist Brainwashing Techniques....*

Phil walking up to the White House gates in the damp March chill, handing the letter, written on American Airlines notepaper and sealed in an American Airlines envelope, to the Marine. While still buzzing from the uppers he dropped in the LAX washroom.

And driving away to find the hotel he's booked himself into.

Everything going down smoothly. Checking in. Washing up in his room. Wondering if he should use the room menu or find a restaurant, when the phone rings. It's his agent. Emmet is downstairs in the lobby. Emmet wants to know what the hell he's up to.

And suddenly Phil is struck by another flash of light, igniting at the center of his panic, and by the terrible thought that he is on the wrong path.

Phil's agent, Anthony Emmet, is smart and ferocious and tremendously ambitious. A plausible and worldly guy who, as he likes to put it, found Phil under a stone one day in the early '50s, when Phil was banging out little sci-fi stories for a living and trying to write straight novels no one wanted to publish. Emmet befriended Phil, guided him, mentored him, argued with him endlessly. Because (he said) he knew Phil had it in him to be huge if he would only quit puttering around with the sci-fi shit. He persuaded Phil to terminate his relationship with the Scott Meredith Agency, immediately sold Phil's long mainstream novel *Voices from the Street* to a new publishing outfit, Dynmart, guided Phil through endless rewrites. And *Voices*, the odyssey of a young man who tries to escape an

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unfulfilling job and a failing marriage, who is seduced by socialists, fascists, and hucksters, but at last finds redemption by returning to the life he once scorned, made it big: it sold over two hundred thousand copies in hardback, won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award, was made into a movie starring Leslie Caron and George Peppard.

But the long struggle with *Voices* blocked or jammed something in Phil. After the deluge, a trickle: a novel about interned Japanese in the Second World War, *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, which received respectful but baffled reviews; a slim novella, *Earthshaker*, cannibalized from an old unpublished novel. And then stalled silence, Phil paralyzed by the weight of his reputation while his slim oeuvre continued to multiply out there in the world, yielding unexpected translations in Basque and Turkish, the proceedings of a symposium on the work of Philip K. Dick and Upton Sinclair, an Australian mini-series which blithely transposed the interned Japanese of *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* into plucky colonial prisoners of war.

Phil hasn't seen his agent for ten years. It seems to him that Emmet still looks as implausibly young as he did the day they first met, his skin smooth and taut and flawless, as if made of some material superior to ordinary human skin, his keen black eyes glittering with intelligence, his black hair swept back, his black silk suit and white silk shirt sharp, immaculate, his skinny black silk tie knotted just so. He looks like a '50s crooner, a mob hitman; he looks right at home in the plush, candlelit red leather booth of the hotel bar, nursing a tall glass of seltzer and trying to understand why Phil wants to see the President.

"I'm on the case about the piracy," Emmet tells Phil. "There's absolutely nothing to worry about. I'm going to make this — " he touches the frazzled book on the table with a minatory forefinger — "go away. Just like I made that short story collection Berkley wanted to put out go away. I have people on this day and night," Emmet says, with a glint of dark menace. "The morons responsible for this outrage are going to be very sorry. Believe me."

"I thought it was about the book," Phil says. He's sweating heavily; the red leather booth is as snug and hot as a glove, or a cocoon. "But now I'm not sure — "

"You're agitated, and I completely understand. A horrible act of theft

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like this would unbalance anyone. And you've been self-medicating again. Ritalin, those huge doses of vitamins...."

"There's nothing wrong with the vitamins," Phil says. "I got the dosages from *Psychology Today*."

"In a paper about treating a kid with schizophrenic visions," Emmet says. "I know all about it. No wonder you're agitated. Last week, I understand, you called the police and asked to be arrested because you were, what was it? A machine with bad thoughts."

Phil is dismayed about the completeness of Emmet's information. He says, "I suppose Mike told you about that."

Mike is Phil's driver and handyman, installed in a spartan little apartment over Phil's three-door garage.

Emmet says, "Of course Mike told me that. He and I, we have your interests at heart. You have to trust us, Phil. You left without even telling Mike where you were going. It would have taken a lot of work to find you, except I just happen to be in Washington on business."

"I don't need any help," Phil tells Emmet. "I know exactly what I'm doing."

But he's not so sure now that he does. When the light hit him he knew with absolute certainty that something was wrong with his life. That he had to do something about it. He fixed on the first thing that had come into his head, but now he wonders again if it is the right thing. Maybe, he thinks unhappily, I'm going deeper into what's wrong. Maybe I'm moving in the wrong direction, chasing the wrong enemy.

Emmet, his psychic antennae uncannily sensitive, picks up on this. He says, "You know *exactly* what to do? My God, I'm glad one of us does, because we need every bit of help to get you out of this mess. Now what's this about a letter?"

Phil explains with great reluctance. Emmet listens gravely and says, "Well, I think it's containable."

"I thought that if I got a badge, I could get things done," Phil says. The martini he's drinking now is mixing strangely with the martinis he drank in the air, with the speed and Ritalin he took in LAX, the speed he took just now in his hotel bedroom. He feels a reckless momentum, feels as if he's flying right there in the snug, hot booth.

"You've got to calm down, Phil," Emmet says. Candlelight glitters in

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his dark eyes as he leans forward. They look like exquisite gems, Phil thinks, cut with a million microscopic facets. Emmet says, "You're coming up to fifty, and you aren't out of your mid-life crisis yet. You're thrashing around, trying this, trying that, when you just have to put your trust in me. And you really shouldn't be mixing Ritalin and Methedrin, you know that's countraindicated."

Phil doesn't try and deny it; Emmet always knows the truth. He says, "It's as if I've woken up. As if I've been dreaming my life, and now I've woken up and discovered that none of it was real. As if a veil, what the Greeks call *dokos*, the veil between me and reality has been swept away. Everything connects, Emmet," Phil says, picking up the book and waving it in his agent's face. Loose pages slip out, flutter to the table or to the floor. "You know why I have this book? I took it from some bum who came up to me in the airport. Call that coincidence?"

"I'd say it was odd that he gave you the copy I gave you," Emmet says. "The agency stamp is right there on the inside of the cover." As Phil stares at the purple mark, he adds, "You're stressed out, Phil, and that weird diet of yours has made things worse, not better. The truth is, you don't need to do anything except leave it all to me. If you're honest, isn't this all a complicated ploy to distract yourself from your real work? You should go back to L.A. tonight, there's a Red Eye that leaves in two and a half hours. Go back to L.A. and go back to work. Leave everything else to me."

While he talks, Emmet's darkly glittering gaze transfixes Phil like an entomologist's pin, and Phil feels that he is shriveling in the warm darkness, while around him the noise of conversation and the chink of glasses and the tinkle of the piano increases, merging into a horrid chittering buzz.

"I hate this kind of jazz," Phil says feebly. "It's so goddamn fake, all those ornate trills and runs that don't actually add up to anything. It's like, at LAX, the soupy strings they play there."

"It's just background music, Phil. It calms people." Emmet fishes the slice of lemon from his mineral water and pops it in his mouth and chews, his jaw moving from side to side.

"Calms people. Yeah, that's absolutely right. It deadens them, Emmet. Turns them into fakes, into inauthentic people. It's all over airwaves now, there's nothing left but elevator music. And as for TV.... It's the corporations,

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Emmet, they have it down to a science. See, if you pacify people, take away all the jagged edges, all the individualism, the stuff that makes us human — what have you got? You have androids, docile machines. All the kids want to do now is get a good college degree, get a good job, earn money. There's no spark in them, no adventure, no curiosity, no rebellion, and that's just how the corporations like it. Everything predictable because it's good for business, everyone hypnotized. A nation of perfect, passive consumers."

Emmet says, "Is that part of your dream? Christ, Phil. We really do need to get you on that Red Eye. Away from this nonsense, before any real damage is done. Back to your routine. Back to your work."

"This is more important, Emmet. I really do feel as if I'm awake for the first time in years."

A man approaches their booth, a tall overweight man in a shiny gray suit and cowboy boots, black hair swept back and huge sideburns framing his jowly face. He looks oddly bashful for a big man and he's clutching something — the paperback of *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*. He says to Phil, "I hope you don't mind, sir, but I would be honored if you would sign this for me."

"We're busy," Emmet says, barely glancing at the man, but the man persists.

"I realize that, sir, so I only ask for a moment of your time."

"We're having a business meeting," Emmet says, with such concentrated vehemence that the man actually takes a step backward.

"Hey, it's okay," Phil says, and reaches out for the book — the man must have bought it in the hotel shop, the price sticker is still on the cover — uncaps his pen, asks the man's name.

The man blinks slowly. "Just your signature, sir, would be fine."

He has a husky baritone voice, a deep-grained Southern accent.

Phil signs, hands back the book, a transaction so familiar he hardly has to think about it.

The man is looking at Emmet, not the signed book. He says, "Do I know you, sir?"

"Not at all," Emmet says sharply.

"I think it's just that you look like my old probation officer," the man says. "I was in trouble as a kid, hanging about downtown with the wrong

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crowd. I had it in my head to be a musician, and well, I got into a little trouble. I was no more than sixteen, and my probation officer, Mr. McFly, he straightened me right out. I own a creme donut business now, that's why I'm here in Washington. We're opening up a dozen new franchises. People surely do love our deep-fried creme donuts. Well, good day to you, sir," he tells Phil, "I'm glad to have met you. If you'll forgive the presumption, I always thought you and me had something in common. We both of us have a dead twin, you see."

"Jesus," Phil says, when the man has gone. The last remark has shaken him.

"You're famous," Emmet tells him. "People know stuff about you, you shouldn't be surprised by now. He knows about your dead sister, so what? He read it in a magazine somewhere, that's all."

"He thought he knew you, too."

"Everyone looks like someone else," Emmet says, "especially to dumb-ass shit-kickers. Christ, now what?"

Because a waiter is standing there, holding a white telephone on a tray. He says, "There's a phone call for Mr. Dick," and plugs the phone in and holds the receiver out to Phil.

Even before Emmet peremptorily takes the phone, smoothly slipping the waiter a buck, Phil knows that it's the White House.

Emmet listens, says, "I don't think it's a good idea," listens some more, says, "He's not calm at all. Who is this Chapin? Not one of — no, I didn't think he was. Haldeman says that, huh? It went all the way up? Okay. Yes, if Haldeman says so, but you better be sure of it," he says, and sets down the receiver with an angry click and tells Phil, "That was Egil Krogh, at the White House. It seems you have a meeting with the President, at twelve-thirty tomorrow afternoon. I'll only ask you this once, Phil. Don't mess this up."

So now Phil is in the White House — in the anteroom to the Oval Office, a presentation copy of *Voices from the Street* under his arm, heavy as a brick. He's speeding, too, and knows Emmet knows it, and doesn't care.

He didn't sleep well last night. Frankly, he didn't sleep at all. Taking a couple more tabs of speed didn't help. His mind racing. Full of weird thoughts, connections. Thinking especially about androids and people.

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The androids are taking over, he thinks, no doubt about it. The suits, the haircuts, the four permitted topics of conversation: sports, weather, TV, work. Christ, how could I not have seen it before?

He scribbles notes to himself, uses up the folder of complementary hotel stationery. Trying to get it down. To get it straight. Waves of anger and regret and anxiety surge through him.

Maybe, he thinks in dismay, I myself have become an android, dreaming for a few days that I'm really human, seeing things that aren't there, like the bum at the airport. Until they come for me, and take me to the repair shop. Or junk me, the way you'd junk a broken toaster.

Except the bum seemed so real, even if he was a dream, like a vision from a reality more vibrant than this. Suppose there is another reality: another history, the real history. And suppose that history has been erased by the government or the corporations or whatever, by entities that can reach back and smooth out the actions of individuals who might reveal or upset their plan to transform everyone and everything into bland androids in a dull gray completely controlled world....

It's like one of the weird ideas he used to write up when he was churning out sci-fi stories, but that doesn't mean it isn't true. Maybe back then he was unconsciously tapping into some flow of greater truth: the truth he should deliver to the President. Maybe this is his mission. Phil suddenly has a great desire to read in his pirated novel, but it isn't in his jacket pocket, and it isn't in his room.

"I got rid of it," Emmet tells him over breakfast.

"You got rid of it?"

"Of course I did. Should you be eating that, Phil?"

"I like Canadian bacon. I like maple syrup. I like pancakes."

"I'm only thinking of your blood pressure," Emmet says. He is calmly and methodically demolishing a grapefruit.

"What about all the citrus fruit you eat? All that acid can't be good for you."

"It's cleansing," Emmet says calmly. "You should at least drink the orange juice I ordered for you, Phil. It has vitamins."

"Coffee is all I need," Phil says. The tumbler of juice, which was sitting at the table when he arrived, seems to give off a poisonous glow, as of radioactivity.

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Emmet shrugs. "Then I think we're finished with breakfast, aren't we? Let's get you straightened out. You can hardly meet the President dressed like that."

But for once Phil stands his ground. He picked out these clothes because they felt right, and that's what he's going to wear. They argue for ten minutes, compromise by adding a tie Emmet buys in the hotel shop.

They are outside, waiting for the car to be brought around, when Phil hears the music. He starts walking, prompted by some unconscious impulse he doesn't want to analyze. Go with the flow, he thinks. Don't impose anything on top of it just because you're afraid. Because you've been *made* afraid. Trust in the moment.

Emmet follows angrily, asking Phil what the *hell* he thinks he's doing all the way to the corner, where a bum is standing with a broken old guitar, singing one of that folk singer's songs, the guy who died of an overdose on the same night Lenny Bruce died, the song about changing times.

There's a paper cup at the bum's feet, and Phil impulsively stuffs half a dozen bills into it, bills which Emmet snatches up angrily.

"Get lost," he tells the bum, and starts pulling at Phil, dragging him away as if Phil is a kid entranced beyond patience at the window of a candy store. Saying, "What are you thinking?"

"That it's cold," Phil says, "and someone like that — a street person — could use some hot food."

"He's isn't a person," Emmet says. "He's a bum — a piece of trash. And of course it's cold. It's March. Look at you, dressed like that. *You're* shivering."

He is. But it isn't because of the cold.

March, Phil thinks now, in the antechamber to the Oval Office. The Vernal Equinox. When the world awakes. Shivering all over again even though the brightly lit anteroom, with its two desks covered, it seems, in telephones, is stiflingly hot. Emmet is schmoozing with two suits — H. R. Haldeman and Egil Krogh. Emmet is holding Haldeman's arm as he talks, speaking into the man's ear, something or other about management. They all know each other well, Phil thinks, and wonders what kind of business Emmet has, here in Washington, D.C.

At last a phone rings, a secretary nods, and they go into the Oval Office, which really is oval. The President, smaller and more compact than he

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seems on TV, strides out from behind his desk and cracks a jowly smile, but his pouchy eyes slither sideways when he limply shakes hands with Phil.

"That's quite a letter you sent us," the President says.

"I'm not sure," Phil starts to say, but the President doesn't seem to hear him.

"Quite a letter, yes. And of course we need people like you, Mr. Dick. We're proud to have people like you, in fact. Someone who can speak to young people — well, that's important isn't it?" Smiling at the other men in the room as if seeking affirmation. "It's quite a talent. You have one of your books there, I think?"

Phil holds out the copy of *Voices from the Street*. It's the Franklin Library edition, bound in green leather, his signature reproduced in gold on the cover, under the title. An aide gave it to him when he arrived, and now he hands it to the President, who takes it in a study of reverence.

"You must sign it," the President says, and lays it open like a sacrificial victim on the gleaming desk, by the red and white phones. "I mean, that's the thing isn't it? The thing that you do?"

Phil says, "What I came to do — "

And Emmet steps forward and says, "Of course he'll sign, sir. It's an honor."

Emmet gives Phil a pen, and Phil signs, his hand sweating on the page. He says, "I came here, sir, to say that I want to do what I can for America. I was given an experience a day ago, and I'm beginning to understand what it meant."

But the President doesn't seem to have heard him. He's staring at Phil as if seeing him for the first time. At last, he blinks and says, "Boy, you do dress kind of wild."

Phil is wearing his lucky Nehru jacket over a gold shirt, purple velvet pants with flares that mostly hide his sand-colored suede desert boots. And the tie that Emmet bought him in the hotel shop, a paisley affair like the President's, tight as a noose around his neck.

He starts to say, "I came here, sir," but the President says again, "You do dress kind of wild. But that I guess is the style of all writers, isn't it? I mean, an individual style."

For a moment, the President's eyes, pinched between fleshy pouches, start to anxiously search Phil's face. It seems that there's something

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trapped far down at the bottom of his mild gaze, like a prisoner looking up through the grill of an oubliette at the sky.

"Individual style, that's exactly it," Phil says, seeing an opening, a way into his theme. The thing he knows now he needs to say, distilled from the scattered notes and thoughts last night. "Individualism, sir, that's what it's all about, isn't it? Even men in suits wear ties to signify that they still have this one little outlet for their individuality." It occurs to him that his tie is exactly like the President's, but he plunges on. "I'm beginning to understand that things are changing in America, and that's what I want to talk about — "

"You wanted a badge," Haldeman says brusquely. "A federal agent's badge, isn't that right? A badge to help your moral crusade?"

Emmet and Haldeman and Krogh grinning as if sharing a private joke.

"The badge isn't important," Phil says. "In fact, as I see it now, it's just what's wrong."

Haldeman says, "I certainly think we can oblige, can't we, Mr. President? We can get him his badge. You know, as a gift."

The President blinks. "A badge? I don't know if I have one, but I can look, certainly — "

"You don't have one," Haldeman says firmly.

"I don't?" The President has bent to pull open a drawer in the desk, and now he looks up, still blinking.

"But we'll order one up," Haldeman says, and tells Emmet, "Yes, a special order."

Something passes between them. Phil is sure of it. The air is so hot and heavy he feels that he's wrapped in mattress stuffing, and there's a sharp taste to it that stings the back of his throat.

Haldeman tells the President, "You remember the idea? The idea about the book."

"Yes," the President says, "the idea about the book."

His eyes seem to be blinking independently, like a mechanism that's slightly out of adjustment.

"The neat idea," Haldeman prompts, as if to a recalcitrant or shy child, and Phil knows then, knows with utter deep black conviction, that the President is not the President. Or he is, but he's long ago been turned into a fake of himself, a shell thing, a mechanical puppet. That was what

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I was becoming, Phil thinks, until the clear white light. And it might still happen to me, unless I make things change.

"The neat idea," the President says, and his mouth twitches. It's meant to be a smile, but looks like a spasm. "Yes, here's the thing, that you could write a book for the kids, for the, you know, for the young people. On the theme of, of — "

"'Get High on Life,'" Haldeman says.

"'Get High on Life,'" the President says. "Yes, that's right," and begins a spiel about affirming the conviction that true and lasting talent is the result of self-motivation and discipline; he might be one of those mechanical puppets in Disneyland, running through its patter regardless of whether or not it has an audience.

"Well," Haldeman says, when the President finishes or perhaps runs down, "I think we're done here."

"The gifts," the President says, and bends down and pulls open a drawer and starts rummaging in it. "No one can accuse Dick Nixon of not treating his guests well," he says, and lays on the desk, one after the other, a glossy presigned photograph, cufflinks, an ashtray, highball glasses etched with a picture of the White House.

Emmet steps forward and says, "Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. Dick and I are truly honored to have met you."

But the President doesn't seem to hear. He's still rummaging in his desk drawer, muttering, "There are some neat pins in here. Lapel pins, very smart."

Haldeman and Emmet exchange glances, and Haldeman says, "We're about out of time here, Mr. President."

"Pins, that's the thing. Like this one," the President says, touching the lapel of his suit, "with the American flag. I did have some...."

"We'll find them," Haldeman says, that sharpness back in his voice, and he steers the President away from the desk, toward Phil.

There's an awkward minute while Egil Krogh takes photographs of the President and Phil shaking hands there on the blue carpet bordered with white stars, in front of furled flags on poles. Flashes of light that are only light from the camera flash. Phil blinks them away as Emmet leads him out, through ordinary offices and blank corridors to chill air under a gray sky where their car is waiting.

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"It went well," Emmet says, after a while. He's driving the car — the car Phil hired — back to the hotel.

Phil says, "Who are you, exactly? What do you want?"

"I'm your agent, Phil. I take care of you. That's my job."

"And that other creature, your friend Haldeman, he takes care of the President."

"The President, he's a work of art, isn't he? He'll win his third term, and the next one too. A man like that, he's too useful to let go. Unlike you, Phil, he can still help us."

"He was beaten," Phil says, "in 1960. By Kennedy. And in 1962 he lost the election for governor of California. Right after the results were announced, he said he would give up politics. And then something happened. He came back. Or was he brought back, is that what it was? A wooden horse," Phil says, feeling hollow himself, as empty as a husk. "Brought by the Greeks as a gift."

"He won't get beaten again," Emmet says, "you can count on that. Not in 1976, not in 1980, not in 1984. It worked out, didn't it — you and him?" He smiles, baring his perfect white teeth. "We should get you invited to one of the parties there. Maybe when you finish your book, it'll be great publicity."

"You don't want me to finish the book," Phil says. He feels as if he's choking, and wrenches at the knot of his tie. "That's the point. Whatever I was supposed to do — you made sure I didn't do it."

"Phil, Phil, Phil," Emmet says. "Is this another of your wild conspiracy theories? What is it this time, a conspiracy of boring, staid suits, acting in concert to stifle creative guys like you? Well, listen up, buddy. There is no conspiracy. There's nothing but a bunch of ordinary guys doing an honest day's work, making the world a better place, the best way they know how. You think we're dangerous? Well, take a look at yourself, Phil. You've got everything you ever dreamed about, and you got it all thanks to me. If it wasn't for me, you'd be no better than a bum on the street. You'd be living in a cold-water walk-up, banging out porno novels or sci-fi trash as fast you could, just to keep the power company from switching off your lights. And moaning all the while that you could have been a contender. Get real, Phil. I gave you a good deal. The best."

"Like the deal that guy, the guy at the hotel, the donut guy, got? He

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was supposed to be a singer, and someone just like you did something to him."

"He could have changed popular music," Emmet says. "Even as a donut shop operator he still has something. But would he have been any happier? I don't think so. And that's all I'm going to say, Phil. Don't ever ask again. Go back to your nice house, work on your book, and don't make trouble. Or, if you're not careful, you might be found dead one day from vitamin poisoning, or maybe a drug overdose."

"Yeah, like the folk singer," Phil says.

"Or a car crash," Emmet says, "like the one that killed Kerouac and Burroughs and Ginsberg in Mexico. It's a cruel world out there, Phil, and even though you're washed up as a writer, be thankful that you have me to look after your interests."

"Because you want to make sure I don't count for anything," Phil says, and finally opens the loop of the tie wide enough to be able to drag it over his head. He winds down the window and drops the tie into the cold gritty wind.

"You stupid bastard," Emmet says, quite without anger. "That cost six bucks fifty. Pure silk, a work of art."

"I feel sick," Phil says, and he does feel sick, but that's not why he says it.

"Not in the car," Emmet says sharply, and pulls over to the curb. Phil opens the door, and then he's running and Emmet is shouting after him. But Phil runs on, head down in the cold wind, and doesn't once look back.

He has to slow to a walk after a couple of blocks, out of breath, his heart pounding, his legs aching. The cold, steely air scrapes the bottoms of his lungs. But he's given Emmet the slip. Or perhaps Emmet doesn't really care. After all, he's been ruined as a writer, his gift dribbled away on dead books until nothing is left.

Except for that one book, Phil thinks. *The Man in the High Castle.* The book Emmet conspired to suppress, the book he made me hate so much because it was the kind of thing I was meant to write all along. Because I would have counted for something, in the end. I would have made a difference.

He walks on, with no clear plan except to keep moving. It's a poor neighborhood, even though it's only a few blocks from the White House.

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Despite the cold, people are sitting on the steps of the shabby apartment houses, talking to each other, sharing bottles in brown paper bags. An old man with a terrific head of white hair and a tremendously bushy white moustache sits straight-backed on a kitchen chair, smoking a cheap cigar with all the relish of the king of the world. Kids in knitted caps and plaid jackets bounce a basketball against a wall, calling to each other in clear, high voices. There are Christmas decorations at most windows, and the odors of cooking in the air. A good odor, Phil thinks, a homely, human odor. A radio tuned to a country station is playing one of the old time ballads, a slow, achingly sad song about a rose and a brier twining together above a grave.

It's getting dark, and flakes of snow begin to flutter down, seeming to condense out of the darkening air, falling in a slanting rush. Phil feels the pinpoint kiss of every flake that touches his face.

I'm still a writer, he thinks, as he walks through the falling snow. I still have a name. I still have a voice. I can still tell the truth. Maybe that journalist who interviewed me last month, the one who works for the *Washington Post*, maybe he'll listen to me if I tell him about the conspiracy in the White House.

A bum is standing on the corner outside the steamed window of a diner. An old, fat woman with a mottled, flushed, face, gray hair cut as short as a soldier's. Wearing a stained and torn man's raincoat that's too small for her, so that the newspapers she's wrapped around her body to keep out the cold peep out between the straining buttons. Her blue eyes are bright, watching each passerby with undiminished hope as she rattles a few pennies in a paper cup.

Phil pushes into the diner's steamy warmth and uses the pay phone, and then orders coffee to go. And returns to the street, and presses the warm container into his sister's hand.

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Longtime readers of science fiction might recognize this author's name from the two stories he published in Galaxy *magazine in the 1950s. Younger readers are apt to be familiar with Mr. Arkin's books for children, including* The Clearing *and* Cassie Loves Beethoven. *But popular culture being what it is, odds are better that you recognize this byline as belonging to the talented thespian whose work includes memorable roles in* Catch-22, The Slums of Beverly Hills, The Seven-Percent Solution, *and* The In-Laws *(a favorite around these parts). You might also remember that his was the voice of Schmendrick in the animated adaptation of* The Last Unicorn. *His current projects include the television series* 100 Centre Street *and the forthcoming film* America's Sweethearts.

In his book Why People Believe Weird Things, *skeptic Michael Shermer touches on the question of faith and how it affects debunkers like Martin Gardner who live by applying reason and logic to apparent miracles. Here now is a story that addresses this issue directly.*

The Amazing Grandy

By Alan Arkin

THE AMAZING GRANDY made his way slowly through the plane, suffering the first class passengers as they stowed their mountains of carry-on luggage: their enormous garment bags, their meticulously picked out yet casual underseat bags, the overhead shopping bags from Bloomingdale's and F.A.O. Schwarz. He looked balefully off in the distance, pretending not to be there while they grunted and groaned and filled the aisles, keeping him from his work. He moved briskly forward through business class where everyone was already at their computers, and into the tourist section. The place, he told himself, where he preferred to be. He found his aisle seat in the rear of the plane and sat down with authority, pushing his large black briefcase under the seat in front of him, kneading and shoving it deeply into the inadequate crevice and wedging his feet on either side.

With his peripheral vision he sized up the man sitting next to him in the window seat, the person he would try to avoid for the next several hours. Warning signals screamed at Grandy, telling him to stay buried in

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reading material. The man next to him was some kind of throwback from the sixties, no doubt on his way to Topanga Canyon or Big Sur or was it Taos, now? He was wearing a robe tied with a coarse rope; he had long hair and a beard, and wore sandals on his unsocked feet. Someone to avoid at all costs.

Grandy pulled out his briefcase again. He snapped it open, pulled out a manila folder, and hunched into it with a frown and a privacy hand held up over his eyes like a visor. The beautiful yet married stewardess passed through the plane smiling cheerily, checking seatbelts and taking drink orders from the passengers. The plane taxied down the runway and they were off.

At somewhere around twenty thousand feet Grandy could feel eyes on him. He knew that particular stare. The pilgrim to his right had recognized him. Grandy braced himself for the inevitable question, or review, or critique, and he automatically began the game he'd devised over the years of trying to guess from the man's appearance which one it would be. He decided the man would be generally approving at first so he could slide into the main agenda, which was demonstrating to Grandy the keen edge of his critical faculties. A fan's initial statement always revealed as much about the fan as Grandy needed to know. Sometimes the encounter was pleasant; mostly it was annoying and time-consuming. An essential element in encounters with a fan was the ability to get away. Impossible in this situation.

Trapped in the seat which was an inch and a half too small in each direction, he armed himself against the invasion of privacy by pulling out a pencil and starting to write furiously. The pilgrim cleared his throat and moved closer to him. Intimately. Conspiratorially.

"Excuse me," he said, leaning into Grandy with an unearned intimacy, "I don't mean to bother you...but are you who I think you are?"

Grandy hated that question with all his heart. For twenty years he'd heard it and for twenty years an adequate response eluded him. There was no way to answer it without a degree in nineteenth-century German philosophy. If he answered "Yes," simply, graciously, it made him an egomaniac. If he said, "I'm not sure who you think I am," it was an invitation to an endless dialogue, and if he said "no" he was lying and no one would believe him anyway. If someone asked that particular question, they knew who he was. "How the hell should I know who you think I am?"

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was what he wanted to say, but he never did. On this occasion he hunched over his notes and mumbled "I don't know who you think I am." He said it quietly enough so that it was inaudible yet polite.

"You are, aren't you?" the hippie said, beaming. "You're the Amazing Grandy, right?"

"Yes," Grandy nodded, affecting disinterest in his own celebrity.

"All *right!*" the hippie said predictably. He threw his head back, laughed a short "HA!" gleefully at the ceiling, then leaned close into Grandy. "I really don't want to bug you," he said. "You've probably got work to do, but I just want to tell you I've been a fan of yours for a long time. I'm not into magic very much, but you turn it into something more than that. You make it an art form."

"Thank you," Grandy said, warming up a bit. The man had taste and he was not going to embarrass Grandy by speaking loudly and making spectacles of the two of them.

"I think I saw you on TV a couple of weeks ago, didn't I?" the hippie said.

"You could have," said Grandy, maintaining a warm neutrality in case things turned sour.

"What was it?" the man said, "Jay Leno?"

"Probably Letterman," said Grandy.

"Letterman, right," the man said, "You did that thing with the handkerchiefs and the bananas. It was dazzling, man, and very funny too. In a literary way. It wasn't just jokes; there was real wit in your material. You're talented in a lot of different directions and you have something to say."

"Thank you very much," said Grandy, starting to thaw.

"It must be hard to figure out what to do on television these days," the man went on. "They can play around with the media so easily that people have become blasé and cynical. It must be hard to amaze anybody anymore."

"It's not easy," said Grandy.

"But you found a way to do it," the pilgrim went on. "No one watching could think it was faked."

"It was faked," said Grandy. He smiled knowingly.

"Well, yes, in the sense that it was a magic trick, but I meant...." the

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pilgrim said, trying to continue, but Grandy stopped him with a cautionary finger.

"I take this very seriously," he said. "What you meant to say is that my trick couldn't be manipulated by TV technicians."

"Exactly, exactly," the man agreed, "that's what I meant."

"What I do is illusion," Grandy said, lecturing to the man. "It's not reality. I always make that very clear."

"Right, right," the man said, bobbing his head up and down excitedly, anticipating and almost enjoying the reprimand. "But I think you know what I was trying to say."

"I know what you were trying to say," said Grandy, "but it's an important distinction. I have a thing about it, in fact."

"Right, right," the man said, laughing, his head bobbing up and down many times in hipness and agreement. "I should have remembered. You're into this debunking thing, aren't you?"

"That's right," said Grandy, "and if you know about that, you know I take this very seriously."

"As well you should," said the man, "as well you should." Since it seemed that they might be talking for a bit, the man near the window relaxed a little, and held out his hand. "My name's Jesus, incidentally," he said casually.

The Amazing Grandy took the man's hand gingerly and gave him a furtive glance. Dangerous to continue, impossible not to. "That's an unusual name," he said.

"I suppose so," the man said easily, "and you know what?" he went on, looking slightly sheepish, "I have a confession to make. I don't have a lot of spare time, but when I saw you do that thing with the two ladies, the gasoline, and the dolphin? Where was that? On the 'Caesar's Palace Special,' wasn't it?" Grandy nodded. "I was so excited that I went out and got some paraphernalia to try and duplicate it. I'm embarrassed to even admit it. I don't know what came over me. I didn't get the ladies and the dolphin, obviously, I got small inanimate replicas, you understand, but I couldn't make it work. I couldn't even figure out the principle. What was it, mirrors or what? I don't suppose you'd tell me how you did it? No, no, no," he said, pushing Grandy away as if Grandy was tempting him, "forget I said that." He backed up to the window to get a wide angle view of

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Grandy. "I can't tell you what an absolute gas it is to be sitting next to you," he said, beaming.

"Isn't it supposed to be bad karma or whatever you call it to give yourself the name of Jesus?" Grandy said dubiously.

"I'm *the* Jesus," the man said casually, "but never mind me, I want to talk about you."

"You're Jesus Christ?" Grandy said, his interest piqued.

"*I'm the Jesus*!" the man said, in a self-mocking sort of way. "What an arrogant thing to say. There are half a million Mexicans out there named Jesus and I say 'I'm the Jesus.'"

"Listen, pal," said Grandy with an appreciative chuckle, "If you're Jesus Christ, that makes you 'the' Jesus, let's face it. Hay-soos Gonzales isn't going to feel the least bit slighted, take my word for it. And if I can give you a little advice, don't play yourself down. People don't appreciate it. They expect someone who's 'made it' to act special and if you come on humble they'll resent it and take advantage of you." Grandy loosened his tie and relaxed into the conversation. The two of them had something to talk about now. Something in common. "Everyone knows who Jesus is," he continued, "and if you're him, then you go ahead and call yourself 'the' Jesus. You've earned it, flaunt it." The stewardess came by and gave Grandy his Bourbon and soda, Jesus his Virgin Mary.

Jesus swizzled his drink and began sipping it with a straw. "It must be a blessing for you to have a certain amount of anonymity," he said to Grandy.

Grandy stiffened slightly. "What do you mean by that?" he said.

"Well, you haven't reached superstar status," Jesus said easily, "so you can pretty much come and go as you please without people ragging on you. That's a blessing, don't you think?"

Grandy nodded and looked for the blessing. "Well, look at you," he said to his companion. "You're back here in tourist just like me. You seem to be getting away with it."

Jesus laughed. "Most people aren't very observant. They take a quick look and worry that I'll start singing 'Michael Row the Boat Ashore' or hand out pamphlets on legalizing marijuana, so I usually get a wide berth. If someone gets inquisitive and I want to be left alone, I say I'm doing *Godspell* at a dinner theater in Florida. That gets rid of almost everyone."

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He sipped his drink thoughtfully. "Signing a check or a credit card can tend to start a commotion. I brace myself whenever that comes up." There was a small piece of lemon stuck in his straw and he concentrated on clearing the tip.

"So what are you up to these days?" Grandy asked as casually as he was able.

"Same old stuff," said Jesus, absorbed in his straw.

Grandy was shocked. "Same old stuff? What a jaded-sounding thing to say."

"Well, I'm still doing the same things," said Jesus, "and I've been doing them for a very long time. I don't mean to make it sound boring, it's not, it's just very....familiar. It's what I do. I guess we all get a little blasé about what we do, don't we?"

"What kind of attitude is that?" Grandy said, almost in alarm. "It's got to be great being Jesus. You've got everything in the world going for you. The adoration of the multitudes, you can come and go as you please, you could probably be flying first class right now you wanted to, you get almost universally good press; you've got this veil of benign mystery surrounding you which makes it impossible for anyone to come out and be critical, at least openly. That's all very good stuff. Things seem to going very well for you."

"Well, you've got nothing to complain about either," Jesus said. "Look at you. Magician, raconteur, you're an inventor, world traveler, lecturer, you have the debunking thing too...you're a man of many parts."

"Thank you," Grandy said, thinking about all his many parts.

"How did you get into that debunking business?" Jesus asked, "If you don't mind my asking."

"I don't mind at all," Grandy said. He cleared his throat and shifted himself up in his seat. "There are a lot of frauds and swindlers in the world," he said, warming up to a subject he was clearly passionate about, "and I started getting angry at the advantage they take of innocent, gullible people. I felt I could do something about it."

"Who are they, these frauds and swindlers?" Jesus asked.

Grandy looked at him with mild suspicion. "You know who they are," he said.

"I'm afraid I don't," said Jesus.

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"You said you know about my debunking work," said Grandy.

"I know of it," Jesus said quickly. "I've read a few headlines. I can't say that I've gone into it in any depth."

"Well, here," Grandy said, digging into his briefcase. "Let me show you some of my work on the subject." He pulled out a sheaf of papers and folders, shuffled through them quickly and gave Jesus a looseleaf binder filled with plastic windows. Inside the windows were articles from fairly reputable magazines. Pictures of Grandy jumped off every page, leaning into the camera at a dangerously steep angle, eyes bulging and his hands doing intricate gestures as if trying to hypnotize the viewer into performing a vaguely illicit act. The headline on the first article said, "LOOK OUT, CHARLATANS! HERE COMES GRANDY!" Underneath it said: "Look out, you quacks and mountebanks, you frauds and fakes. Here comes the Amazing Grandy and he's going to debunk you. With the zest of a bloodhound on a fresh trail, Grandy told us: 'I can duplicate all of your miracles. I'm after the humbugs, the fakes who for their own self aggrandizement think they have the right to uproot people's sense of reality. The frauds who give people false hope with promises of miracle cures, who profess to have incredible powers, who claim to have a pipeline to the hereafter, who'd like us to believe they can move material objects from a distance, who tell us they have intimate relationships with aliens and God-like beings from other solar systems.'"

Jesus leafed through the book looking at the headlines. "My goodness," he said, "this is quite a crusade you're on. I had no idea."

"Let them enthrall the masses, that's fine," Grandy said, the sight of his articles refueling his sense of mission. "Let them make a living at it, let them make huge sums of money. That's fine too, but they have no right to play with people's minds. It's evil, it's manipulatory, and it's dangerous." He downed his drink quickly and set the glass sharply on the tray as punctuation. "So I go after the frauds. I get them too," he said, leaning in to Jesus, as if implying more than he could speak about.

"How do you expose them?" Jesus asked.

"It's actually very easy," Grandy said, "I just watch the acts. I look for the passes, the sleight of hand, the mechanical equipment, the shills and accomplices. If you've been doing this as long as I have you know what to look for. I see them a couple of times, I dope them out, then I simply

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duplicate their routines. And I do it with more style, and more production value, and it's over. It's the end of them."

"My goodness," Jesus said, still examining the material. "You've got everything in here. Flying saucers, spoon benders, all kinds of things. How do you do flying saucers?"

"Easy as pie," said Grandy, gleefully. He cleared his throat and sat up very straight. "Remote control model airplanes, somewhat modified with revolving lights and things, and an eight millimeter camera. What could be simpler?"

"What about the Philippine healers?" Jesus asked.

"That's just sleight of hand and a bag of chicken guts," said Grandy, with a shrug.

"What did you do with the spoon bender?" said Jesus.

"Uri Geller? A simple and stupid act," Grandy said, motioning to the stewardess for another drink, "but he has controls that are difficult to duplicate. That took several months to figure out, believe it or not. I ended up respecting him in a certain kind of way."

"Elizabeth Kübler Ross? What's she doing in here?"

"The light at the end of the tunnel business. Disembodied family members. I did that routine at a medical convention and it brought down the house. I got wonderful press on that one. Wonderful. You should try to catch it sometime. I do Edgar Cayce in the same evening if I have the budget. He takes a lot of time because I have to do medical checks on the entire audience. During the act I have doctors talking to me on an ear mike. The predictions are easy. You can say anything, as long as you get laughs. No one bothers to wait forty years to see if they come true."

"And the Maharishi?"

"The flying routine? Levitating?" Grandy said scornfully. "Come on. It's just the old rope trick. Oldest routine in the world. They put the kibosh on that along with the Hindu Fakirs decades ago. This was just a variation on that chestnut." Grandy reached over and turned a page in the portfolio. "This I was very proud of," he said, pointing to the Dalai Lama. "I did a reincarnation number for the Sony Corporation in Tokyo. I got a three-year-old black kid from Detroit. We got him to look through about a hundred items, twelve of which belonged to one of their executives who died about two years before. The kid picked them out, said they were his,

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and demanded them back. The crowd went absolutely nuts, and that's one I'm not revealing to anyone. It was too hard and took too long to work out. Simple principle, but murderously difficult to perfect. Kids are always unpredictable."

"You've even got Padre Pio in here," said Jesus, lost in the picture.

"I had a little problem with him," said Grandy. "Not with the routine, that was easy, but his fans gave me a really hard time. A very zealous group. I almost had to back off and drop the routine."

"What's the routine?" Jesus asked.

"Oh, you know, the bleeding hands, being in two places at one time...."

"What you're doing can get dangerous," said Jesus.

"Tell me about it," said Grandy.

"What I mean is, you don't want to throw out the baby with the bathwater."

"Please," said Grandy holding up a cautionary hand, "not you too?"

"Just a thought," said Jesus, leafing through more of the book. "Do you do me?" he asked casually, flipping the pages.

"I've got you down," said Grandy, chuckling like a bad boy. "You're easy."

"What stuff of mine do you do?" Jesus asked with delight.

"I do the walking on water, for example," Grandy said.

"You're kidding me," Jesus said.

"No I'm not," said Grandy. "The first time was at Four Flags in New Jersey. It was spectacular. We had a crowd of about ten thousand people."

"I think I had about a dozen when I did it," said Jesus.

"Yes, and if I recall they were close personal friends of yours," said Grandy, "So you couldn't use them for corroboration. It wouldn't hold up. No one would buy it."

"How do you walk on water?" Jesus asked Grandy.

"Simple as can be. A moving platform under water. We started with a biblical water ballet to dispel the possibility of the platform, then I appear in a rowboat, I get out, and I walk on the water. It was simple but it was spectacular. The crowd goes crazy. I also do the loaves and fishes."

"Really!" Jesus said, obviously impressed.

Grandy reached over and flipped through the notebook to a picture of a throng. "Take a look at this. Knotts Berry Farm," he said. "Nineteen

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eighty seven. Eight thousand people. Three thousand fish and two thousand loaves of bread. What was your crowd?"

"I don't think we had more than about five or six hundred," said Jesus. "It felt like a pretty big group at the time."

"I do the return from the dead," said Grandy, beginning to gloat a little in spite of himself.

"What about healing the leper?" Jesus asked.

"That's a tough one," said Grandy. "I haven't done that one yet. There are a couple of ways to go but I haven't found anything that feels right. I could pay someone off to say he'd been a leper, use makeup, cheap stuff like that, that's the easy way, but I'm scrutinized very carefully. They go over my subjects with a fine tooth comb. That's something you didn't have to worry about."

"I had other things to worry about," said Jesus.

"Maybé, but they were simpler times," said Grandy. "People were easier to please."

"Do you know why I'm so impressed with you?" Jesus said.

Grandy looked for some edge of sarcasm in his voice. He found none. "Why?" he asked.

"Because you can *do* things. That's why," Jesus said. "And you know *how* you do them. You get an idea, you figure out a way it will work, and then it does. It works. There's a whole arc of experience for you. The excitement of the chase. Conquest and sense of mastery. Very appealing."

"So can you do things. Supposedly you've done a lot of things."

"Naaah," said Jesus with a self-deprecatory wave of his hand." I can't do anything. All I can do is ask that it be done. Then I sit around and wait. And hope. Sometimes it's done and sometimes it isn't done. And then once it is done, if it is done, I never know how it's done. It's frustrating. It's an anxious-making situation. I had to finally adopt the philosophy that if it didn't happen, then 'it wasn't meant to be.' I used to wonder if that thought wasn't just a dodge to fend off disappointment, but I've come to think there might be something to it."

"Win some, lose some," said Grandy in a sort of agreement.

"Exactly," Jesus said, tapping Grandy on the chest with a finger, "win some, lose some. Or better yet... 'Thy Will Be Done!'" He said this rather grandly, then he looked out at the clouds and said it more simply; this time

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to the sky. He went back to Grandi's portfolio, leafing through it randomly. "You've got it all down," he said. "Amazing. You've got the goods on everyone. You've debunked the whole world. No one can get past you. No one can do anything that you can't duplicate." He looked at Grandy with appreciation, then thought of something. "Well perhaps there's one thing I can do that you can't," said Jesus, smiling.

"And what is that?" Grandy asked imperiously.

Jesus moved closer to him and looked into his eyes as no one had ever looked in his eyes. Not his mother, not the several women who had professed to love him, not his dog, not his most adoring fans. "I can forgive you," Jesus said simply. He smiled at Grandy, gently and innocently. The Amazing Grandy stared back in shock and confusion. Was it a joke? He looked for a hint of humor in that face, or mockery. He looked for superiority, for anger, for something he could give a name to. Jesus didn't turn away under his scrutiny, he just sat there beaming and beaming, smiling and open and compassionate.

Grandy stared back, his confusion turned to contempt, then outrage and indignation. "You can *forgive* me?" he managed to say. "For what? For what am I being forgiven? Who are you to forgive me?" Jesus continued to smile at him. "That's your great talent? That's your gift?" Grandy sputtered, maintaining enough control to keep the other passengers from taking notice. "That's what makes you special?" He snorted in derision and tried to stare Jesus down. Jesus just smiled and smiled. Grandy forced himself to turn away. He dug furiously into his portfolio and buried himself in the notes for his appearance that evening, trying to give the impression that he was able to concentrate on something. When he left the plane he did not say good-bye to Jesus, he didn't offer him a ride or exchange addresses.

He went to his hotel. He took off his jacket and pants and put them neatly on the bed. He lay down next to them and turned on the television set. Somewhere in the middle of the local news he became consumed by deep uncontrollable sobs of grief and pain that threatened to tear him apart. "What the hell is this?" Grandy said in the middle of the earthquake going on inside him. Sobbing and gasping for breath, he looked down upon himself as at some strange specimen, some alien. The spasms continued through his shower, through getting dressed, and only subsided when he was in the elevator on the way down to meet his contact for the lecture.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

WAITING (AND WAITING) FOR ANOTHER *ROGER RABBIT*

IN THE TV commercial, a determined and somewhat anxious little boy stomps through Disney World. There will be no rides or other amusements for him, he informs his parents, until he gets a chance to meet and greet that great American icon, Mickey Mouse. Then, magically, the bright-eyed rodent appears before the lad, and the little tyke is struck dumb with awe and joy.

Ah, to be four again! To see some dude (or dudess) in red pants, big shoes, and an oversized plastic puppet head, and somehow believe that you're actually meeting a favorite cartoon friend — wouldn't that be swell?

You bet it would. And that is why even those of us who are old enough to know better have always been enchanted by movies that mix animation and live action, cartoons and a "real" world.

In the 1920s the Fleischer brothers produced their KoKo the Clown cartoons, in which their hero emerged "Out of the Inkwell" to move through photographed environments. Conversely, in Walt Disney's earliest "comics," the Alice comedy shorts, a real little girl interacted with animated characters and illustrated backgrounds.

So, from the early days of films, these two realms have converged on screen. Because of the labor-intensive and technically challenging nature of animation/live-action hybrids, the classic examples were either short films, or cartoon-enhanced interludes in acted films.

Most of us can remember at least a few such screen gems: Gene Kelly and Jerry (the mouse) dancing together in *Anchors Aweigh* (1945); Dick Van Dyke making merry with

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a chorus line of penguins in *Mary Poppins* (1964); or Lily Tomlin having a Snow White fantasy, complete with animated fauna, in the gender farce, *9 to 5* (1980).

Then there was *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), a movie as fresh and visually stunning today as it was when it was first released. (If you have never seen this movie, put this review down, and immediately go out and rent or buy it on tape or DVD! That's an order, buster!)

A pitch-perfect blend of classic cartoon zaniness and Chandler-esque hardboiled mystery, *Roger Rabbit* also brought animation and live action together in a way that was seamless and utterly believable — and sustained the illusion for almost two full hours.

It helped to have a magician like Robert Zemeckis at the helm. And it was essential to have top-of-the-line (if not superstar) actors in the live-action roles. No matter how carefully animation is integrated into a live scene, if the human player can't make you *believe* that he's handcuffed to a frenetic rabbit, or that he is speeding through town in a cartoon cab, then the realism of the fantasy cannot work.

While preparing this piece, I recently re-watched *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, and was mesmerized, again, by Bob Hoskins's performance as private eye and 'toon-hater, Eddie Valiant. The man is bleepin' brilliant. And so were the animators and voice actors who created his co-stars.

When I first saw *Roger Rabbit*, I remember thinking that here was the breakthrough — the watershed — the movie that opened up a brave new world of moviemaking.

Little did I know that with all the technical progress of the last decade, the artistry of *Roger Rabbit* would still set it apart as the best example of Animation/Live Action moviemaking.

What came after hasn't come close.

Cool World, Ralph Bakshi's 1992 two-worlds-collide drama, was a fiasco from beginning to end. The acting was pathetic. (Brad Pitt is a lovely young man, but he will never be the actor Bob Hoskins is.) And the integration of animation to live action was surprisingly badly meshed. To add to the disappointment, the story was incoherent, the screen action chaotic, and the cartoon characters were repellent, especially the two "doodle" babes who try to tempt the "'noid" heroes into doing the nasty with them.

Space Jam (1996) was better,

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but not by a lot. Michael Jordan and the Warner Brothers stable of cartoon characters made for a high-concept pitch, but a mediocre movie.

But, even so, it was a more satisfying movie than last summer's *Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*, directed by Des McAnuff. What the heck was screenwriter Kenneth Lonergan thinking when he wrote this drivel? (And how is it possible for the same guy to have written and directed the brilliant sibling comedy-drama, *You Can Count on Me*?) Lonergan's screenplay makes many small missteps and one absolutely fatal error: it transforms America's best loved cartoon baddies into *humans*. I like Renee Russo and Jason Alexander. But, come on! I want Boris to be a *cartoon* Boris. And I absolutely require that the fabulous Natasha Fatale be a cartoon Natasha.

If you're going to contrast the 'toon world with the human, keep it straight who's a human and who's a cartoon. Sadly, even though Rocky and Bullwinkle remain "animated," they are remarkably lifeless creations. The computer-generated techniques used to "draw" them produced muddy colors and cold images. And, odder yet, little Rocky seems to have a peevish expression on his face much of the time. The flat, almost crude animation of the original series had much more natural warmth and humor.

You get the sense that the people who made the movie had a real affection for the old cartoons. They just didn't know how to translate that affection into a watchable feature film. Indeed, I suspect it was an impossible task, with just Rocky and Bullwinkle to work with. Moose and Squirrel might have been the titular stars of the original series, but, let's face it, the best segments of the series were the "Fractured Fairy Tales," the "Aesop & Son" fables, and, above all, the "Improbable History" adventures of Mr. Peabody and his boy, Sherman. Without these cartoon stars to spice up the cast, the project was doomed from the get-go.

And so, I fear, was *Monkeybone*, a film that integrates stop-motion animation with live action. Directed by Henry Selick (who did such fine work with *Tim Burton's Nightmare Before Christmas*, and *James and the Giant Peach*), *Monkeybone* was written by Sam Hamm from a graphic novel by Kaja Blackley, illustrated by Vanessa Chong.

The film opens with a shy cartoonist named Stu Miley (Brendan

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Fraser) hitting it big. His cartoon series about Monkeybone, an impish monkey (and none too subtle Jungian manifestation of his unbridled id), has been picked up by a network, and is about to strike merchandizing gold.

Stu seems ill-suited for fame and fortune, however. All he really wants to do is go home and propose to his doctor girlfriend, Julie (Bridget Fonda). But before he can, an auto accident sends him into a coma, whereupon he descends into a netherworld called Downtown.

Here is where the movie *Monkeybone* should be its most entertaining. It is not. Downtown is a dark chaotic carnival camp full of characters in bad costumes and big puppet heads. The film implies that this is a limbo territory for all souls between life and death. But it looks like a freak show and nothing more.

Except for Stu, no one else seems to be waiting to wake up and get on with life. Indeed, none of the denizens of Downtown look like they've ever even been on Earth. That is, except for a few incarcerated folks like Attila the Hun, Lizzie Borden, and — even more absurdly — Stephen King. (Hey, don't ask me! I just write the reviews.)

There's one other creature Stu meets up with in Downtown, of course. And that is his own errant cartoon creation, Monkeybone. As you might imagine, the movie ultimately succeeds or fails on the ability of this little cartoon critter (voiced by John Turturro) to amuse and delight an audience. Think Curious George on mescaline and Viagra, and consider whether *you'd* want to spend over ninety minutes in his company. Thought not.

Mr. Selick, who knows animation very well, inexplicably fails to give Monkeybone much facial expression, and Turturro's voice is all whine and chatter. In the end, the character of Monkeybone has little personality, just a penchant for annoying the hell out of people forced to watch his frenetic actions.

The rest of the plot relates to Stu's attempts to steal an exit pass from Death (an unhappy looking Whoopi Goldberg), and Julie's attempts to bring Stu out of his coma before her lover's inexplicably callous sister (Megan Mullaly, doing Karen schtick) pulls the plug on his life support.

Monkeybone doesn't make a lot of sense, and, worse, makes little creative use of the contrast between animation and action.

In *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*, the best part of the

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movie is the establishing cartoon bits at the beginning, and a mid-movie animated scene in which Bullwinkle has to travel up the Northeast corridor in an e-mail, surfing the web as he goes.

In their natural pen and paint environment, Rocky and Bullwinkle shine. But they seem as dull as dishwater, and completely out of place, in a live action world. Hence, their "Adventures" never connect with viewers.

On the other hand, in *Monkeybone*, the best scenes involve actors in live-action locales. In one hilarious segment, Fraser's Stu, temporarily possessed by Monkeybone, attempts to make jungle love to a stunned Julie. In another scene, Stu, in desperate need of another body, re-animates the earthly remains of a dead gymnast and organ donor, played by SNL's Chris Kattan. Inside, he's a man in love, outside he's a decomposing corpse with a broken neck and organs spilling out of his sliced torso.

It's gross, stupid, but undeniably funny stuff. No cartoon characters were involved. Nor were they missed.

Who Framed Roger Rabbit proved that you can make a great feature movie by exploring the intersection of the real and the fantastical, the human and the 'toon. Movies like *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle* and *Monkeybone* prove that just inserting cartoon characters into live action, or actors into make-believe settings, doesn't automatically translate into screen magic.

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Charles Finlay lives in Columbus, Ohio, with his wife and their two young karate masters-in-training. His is a name to watch, as you'll be seeing a lot of it in issues to come. Mr. Finlay's first story for us ventures into the near future with a tale that recalls Hemingway's observation that like an iceberg, ninety percent of a story lies beneath the surface.

Footnotes

By Charles Coleman Finlay

1. *Report of the Joint Investigating Committee* (Washington DC, 2027) pp. 2-3.

2. Or possibly on 6 Jan. Destruction of evidence during the cover-up makes verification impossible. See *Report*, pp. 342-64.

3. Email from Willem Redmond to Stephanie Werks, 11:07 a.m. PST, 8 Jan 2019, Subj: one more thing. Correspondence is collected in *Report*, Appendix 2, Supporting Documents.

4. Werks to Beverly Dohnt (and 79 others), 11:21 a.m. PST, 8 Jan 2019, Subj: Fw: one more thing.

5. *Ibid.*, 11:45 a.m. PST, 8 Jan 2019, Subj: Oops! :)

6. The two- to three-week delay between distribution and the first outbreak of symptoms remains difficult to explain. For a full discussion, see James Skapt, *What Really Happened?* (London, 2022).

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7. Connor DeSilva, *The Evolution of Disaster* (St. Louis, 2041). The more famous outbreak in Overbrook, Kansas, on 30 Jan is now regarded as a secondary event.

8. These effects either duplicated or mimicked the earliest class of nanoneuropharmaceuticals. "Repairing the Brain: A Special Issue," *Nanoscience* Vol. 28, (2017).

9. For a technical description, see Madhu Mantri, "Insect hormone failsafes in substituted cyclohexane hinges," in *Proceedings of the 26th International Foresight Foundation*, 2018.

10. A core group of scientists continues to dissent because this mechanism has never been reproduced. An alternate distribution paradigm is explained in Heather Malvey, *A Conspiracy of Dunces* (Carbondale, 2039).

11. Malvey, pp. 165-182. The Center for Disease Control continued to pursue the viral hypothesis for another full year.

12. If this was the case, then preliminary work had already been accomplished. Russell Sinnot, Xi Han, et al, "In vivo evolution of protein enzymes for specific catalytic targets," *Nanoscience* Vol. 26, 64-74 (2015).

13. Hafiz Tuzun, Wade Langer, H. M. de Heer, "Hippocampal deformation by cultured organic processors," *Nature*, 28 March 2017, pp. 1922-1925.

14. Other symptoms included configural association failure and foreign accent syndrome, though most of the evidence is highly anecdotal. See Sinclair Roberts, "Beyond anterograde amnesia: assessing the impact," *Journal of Brain Research*, Vol 46, pp. 264-297 (2024).

15. More permeable quarantines were created in Amsterdam, New Delhi, Guandong, and other cities.

16. For an in-depth study of the sterilization techniques, see Juan Morales

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and Shirley Hadlock, *Silicon Valley of Death*, (Burlington, 2031) chapters 3-5.

17. The lack of clear jurisdiction immobilized other governments also, and led to the subsequent sweeping change of power. Evan N. Fier, *The Unexpected Revolution: Government Without Borders, 2019-2023* (ieBooks, 2039) pp. 79-121.

18. Redmond denied this at first. Interview transcript, CNN, Special Report, cnn.news, 2 Feb 2019, archived.

19. This analysis is based on the Benn-Reich model of multinational decision making. See Sumiko Saito, "The New Pacific Rim Management Culture," *Journal of Corporate Anthropology*, vol. 3 no. 2 (2011), pp. 223-35.

20. Wei Ling, Anya Soboskey, et al, "'We Have A Little Problem': A Case Study in Corporate Indecision," *Journal of Corporate Anthropology*, vol. 15 no. 1 (2023), pp. 1-37.

21. Werks, press release, 3 Feb 2019, in *Report*, Appendix 3. Werks repeated this claim until her death, but the former assistant was never found or questioned.

22. The hostile takeover had been all but completed the previous month. It seems more probable that the release was intended for the company's Asian and Russian competitors instead. See Morales and Hadlock, pp. 179-81.

23. Redmond, Werks, and Sundeep Case (U.S. v. Belgium), 2029, International Court of Justice (1 July) (Separate Opinion of Judge Wawn).

24. Initial figures were high because many of the missing were presumed dead. These numbers were subsequently reduced.

25. For the short- and long-term mortality estimates, respectively, see

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Report, pp. 7-16, and Appendix 4; and Stanley Lamb-Stirling, "A Neural Hiroshima: Twenty-Five Years Later," worldreport.news, 11 Jan 2044, archived.

26. Victor Skilliman, *Brain Drain*, (Boulder, 2029) pp. 59-83. There are significant gaps in both the Geneva registry and the private non-profit Stop-The-Madness victims list.

27. From her poem, "17 More Reasons Why We'll Forget," at *Artists Respond*, collected by Ella Hynde, the-hynde-site.arts, 2020, archived. This is the complete verse as it appears on the monument in Tsuibo Garden:

XIII.

Because we too saw the overturned chair,
the scattered papers, cubicle wall askew.

Because we quickly stepped aside, afraid,
when they fled, wild strangers to themselves.

Trash, floating in the river, on the highway berm;
styrofoam-white bones in brown autumn leaves.

For some, for some, not even that,
a rapture without trumpets, without salvation.

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The Amazing Goulart denies having been an influence on either of the main characters in Alan Arkin's story (elsewhere in this issue). He does, however, own up to being the author of four mystery novels featuring Groucho Marx as a gumshoe, the most recent of which is Groucho Marx and the Broadway Murders. *Due out shortly is a collection of some of his mystery stories with the wonderful title* Adam and Eve on a Raft.

We F&SF *readers first encountered Heather Moon in the June 1997 issue and she showed her magical presence again in our Fiftieth Anniversary issue nearly two years ago. Is the third time a charm?*

Concerning My Third Encounter with Heather Moon

By Ron Goulart

IT STARTED WITH THE goblins.

Just about every evening at sundown back then I was in the habit of taking a walk along the beach. The cottage I was renting in the town of Santa Rita Beach sat on a low bluff overlooking the Pacific. You went down some quirking redwood stairs and there was the seashore.

After I'd hiked less than a quarter of a mile along the sand on that particular evening, the weather abruptly changed. The twilight sky turned a thick, leaden gray; a chill wind came rushing in across the darkening sea. Not typical early evening weather for Southern California in October.

Then came fog, thick cold stuff that smelled strongly of damp, fresh-turned earth.

Up ahead on my left, where nothing had been the night before, sat a fruit juice stand. It was one of those old-fashioned kind, made of galvanized metal and shaped like an orange, that you still sometimes saw at the side of roads leading to out-of-the-way towns.

As I slowed, eyeing the dented orange sphere, a panel creaked and

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rasped open to reveal a slightly lopsided counter and a thin yellowish light within.

All at once a large neon sign blossomed to life above the metal orange. GOBLIN FRUIT STAND. OPEN ALL HOURS!

Inside the sphere someone spoke in a deep, growly voice.

I couldn't make out any of the words, although I thought I caught my name.

As you may know, I'd had a few previous experiences with supernatural manifestations. So I wasn't exactly horrified that a batch of goblins had set up shop on the stretch of beach near my cottage and was now apparently trying to solicit my business.

Squaring my shoulders once, I walked across the gritty sand to the juice stand. "I didn't quite catch what you said," I called in the direction of the opening in the orange.

"Give me a boost up, asshole, else I shan't reach the flapping counter."

"Here now, what did I tell you about calling me insulting names?" inquired a falsetto voice. "Stand on the blinking stool, why don't you?"

I noticed two paws gripping the edge of the counter. They were furry and catlike paws, yet somewhat too large to belong to a cat.

The fellow who looked out at me had a sort of catlike face, too. A surly gray cat about the size of a three-year-old child. He was dressed, far as I could see, in a homespun monk's robe and cowl. "You're, am I right, Will Harkins?"

"I am, yeah. And you'd be what exactly? The sign mentions goblins, so is that — "

"Stow the blooming small talk and get to the dire warning, if you please," piped the unseen goblin.

"You have to build up to these things," said the monkish one, frowning at his partner down below and his eyes flaring yellow. "That's what they call the old soft sell. Am I right, Harkins?"

"Well, when I was in advertising back in New York it was. Right now, though, I'd like to know what — "

"Okay, here comes the warning, kiddo," announced the shaggy goblin. He coughed into his shaggy paw. "Do not aid, abet, or otherwise help Heather Moon in any way or — "

"Wait, whoa. You guys have got this wrong," I interrupted, leaning in

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closer to the counter and the visible goblin. "It's Heather Moon who, on past occasions, has helped *me* out of supernatural predicaments. I don't help her, see, she — "

"Tell him about the demons," urged the falsetto goblin.

"I was coming to that, mate. If you so much as help said Heather Moon in any way, shape, or form...well, buddy boy, huge unseemly demons from the pits of the fiery inferno will come fetch you and you'll barbecue in the netherworld for all eternity and then some."

"Listen, guys, I haven't even seen Heather Moon for almost three damn years, back when LBJ was still president," I told them, annoyed. "And that was back in Manhattan. Far as I know she's still there, married to some bearded stage magician who treats her badly."

"She's approaching," warned the unseen goblin. "Let's scram."

The stool made some scraping, tottering sounds and then the monkish goblin fell from view. "A word to the wise, Harkins," he called.

The neon sign sputtered, died, and faded away. The word GOBLIN went last. Shimmering, producing a harsh keening, the whole stand then vanished.

I watched the fog close in over the spot where the orange had stood.

"I'm sorry about this, Will."

Turning, I saw Heather Moon standing there near the water's edge. Slim and pretty, wearing jeans and a cablestitch pullover. Her auburn hair was longer and she wore it pulled back and tied with a single twist of scarlet ribbon.

"We were just talking about you," I managed to say.

She nodded, smiling faintly. "I came to see you," she said, moving up across the sand toward me, "because I need your help."

"A minor annoyance?" I asked.

Heather shrugged her left shoulder. "They're only goblins," she said. "Although it's too bad they had to come by and heckle you."

"This went a little way beyond heckling, Heather," I pointed out. "They were threatening me with eternal damnation,"

"That's one of their stock threats and they, usually, can't back it up," she said. "I wouldn't, though, eat any of their fruit."

We were sitting in the beam-ceilinged living room of my beach

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cottage. Looking downhill through the picture window you could see the dark surf come foaming in across the night beach.

Shifting in my yellow canvas sling chair, I said, "So goblins aren't what you need my help with?"

Heather was sitting on my low white sofa, holding the cup of cocoa I'd fixed. "Nope, I have a perfectly good spell that gets rid of goblins," she assured me. "Which they know full well."

I took a sip of my cocoa. "Before we get to the part where I can be of assistance," I said, "could I ask you a couple of non-occult questions?"

She smiled. "Divorced," she said, "nearly two years ago."

"You and Harry Firedrake, Jr., the stage magician?"

"Him, my only husband so far."

"When you and I got together, briefly, in Manhattan three years ago, the time you helped me rid my life of imps, I thought — "

"I remember what happened then, Will," she said. "And, yes, Harry didn't treat me especially well. That's why we parted eventually."

"He didn't fight the idea of a divorce?"

"At first, but then my father teleported him to the Gobi Desert for a couple days. When he brought Harry back, he was somewhat subdued."

"Good." I grinned. "Firedrake seemed like the sort of guy who could do with considerable subduing. One more thing I'd like to know is — "

"Why I'm in California."

Nodding, I said, "A visit or are — "

"I moved out here almost a year ago," Heather told me. "My Uncle Alfie has a big place in Bayside, near Santa Monica, and I have one wing. Live there, do business from there."

'"Business?"

She stood up, walked over to the window, and gazed out at the night. "Maybe this is why I didn't look you up earlier, Will," she said quietly. "Because I'm not exactly using my abilities the way I'd like to." She paused, taking a sighing breath in and out. "What I've done is set up as a sort of psychic consultant. Since I settled in Southern California, I've built up a darned good client list that includes a lot of wealthy movie people. They depend on me for advice."

I left my chair. "What are you pretending to be, a fortune teller?" I asked her, frowning. "You have *real* magical powers. Your whole family—

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on both sides—is gifted in a hell of a lot of supernatural ways. You can trace your ancestors back to white-magic sorcerers, wizards — "

"I know, I know. But right now I want to set aside enough money so that I can do what I really want to do."

"Which is?" I moved up behind her, put a hand on her shoulder.

"We'll talk about that later." She lifted my hand away, turned to face me. "I want to explain the favor I've come to ask you to do for me."

"Since we met back in college, you've saved my life twice," I said. "So I owe you a lot, Heather. One favor is sure — "

"This is going to take a while to explain."

We sat down beside each other on my sofa.

It took Heather over a half hour to tell me what was wrong and what I had to do to help her out.

The next day I had lunch with a friend of mine at Moonbaum's Delicatessen on Sunset in Hollywood.

Out through the windows of the place you could see the hazy afternoon, a fine sampling of smog, and an impressive variety of foreign sports cars whizzing by.

You'd find Paul Arkadian in his usual booth most afternoons. At that time Arkadian ran a small and very successful advertising agency with offices on the Sunset Strip. He was noted for producing what they used to call offbeat ads and commercials and was almost as good as Stan Freberg.

I think somebody told me a year or so ago that they'd seen Arkadian's obit and that he'd died in a hospice down near San Diego someplace. I lost track of him after I left LA. I thought about sending condolences, but apparently there were no survivors to send them to.

Back then I used to see Arkadian a couple times a week. He was one of the few people I could discuss personal, and sometimes strange and unusual, stuff with.

That particular afternoon he was intent on recounting the latest troubles he was having with his Jaguar XKE. Arkadian was a slim man in his late thirties, with crinkly black hair and dark rings under his eyes. "And she reversed the charges on the long distance call," he was saying as he forlornly poked at one of his blintzes with his fork.

"Has it ever occurred to you that Nicky may not be the girl for you?"

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"She isn't, we already know that. But when I'm in the sack with her, I tend to forget past — "

"I'd also be careful of sleeping with a woman who makes her living doing animal imitations for radio spots."

"She's a gifted actress and voice work is only a stepping stone on the — "

"Maybe so, but this is the third time she's borrowed your Jag and then abandoned it someplace."

"It's the fourth actually, but who's counting?"

"Seems to me, Paul, you could find a woman in Greater Los Angeles who would sleep with you and yet not borrow your car, take assorted beaus for joy rides, and then abandon the thing at rundown motels in remote sectors of Southern Cal."

"True, but their tits wouldn't compare with hers." He took another forlorn bite of his blueberry blintz.

I said, "Something unusual came up last night."

New wrinkles formed under Arkadian's eyes. "Is this a subtle hint that you don't want to hear any more about my wayward Jaguar?"

"I try to allot only a certain amount of my time each day to the topic, and we've exceeded that."

"You appear, now that I look at you closely, to be both elated and a mite stunned," he observed. "The events of last night are responsible?"

Resting my elbows on the tabletop, I said, "Well, it started with the goblins and then, of all people — "

"Goblins?" He hunched, forehead furrowing, and stared across at me. "Jesus, don't tell me they're after you now."

I eyed him. "The goblins are only a minor annoyance, according to — "

"Deep shit," pronounced Arkadian forlornly. "If the goblins are harassing you, buddy, you are in deep shit."

"They were trying to sell me orange juice initially," I said. "But what do you know about goblins? I'm the one who usually — "

"That's how I lost the Little Miss Muffin account this spring and my eighteen percent of their $3,000,000-a-year billing," he confided, lowering his voice. "It sure sounds to me, Will, as though you've attracted the attention of the Sunset-Dacobra Agency."

I sat up. "You've heard of them?"

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"Haven't you?"

"Not until last night, when Heather — "

"They set up shop in Hollywood about eight-nine months ago, very low profile." My friend paused, glancing around the half empty afternoon deli. Then he lowered his voice even further. "They call themselves a talent management organization and their clients include actors, writers, copywriters, advertising execs, and so on. Seems they wanted that Little Miss Muffin account for an ad agency they represented and they started sending goblins around to persuade me to drop it."

"These goblins, so I'm told, aren't all that dangerous. They're only the first wave of supernatural — "

"I never got beyond that. First they showed up on my doorstep, making snide remarks and threats," he recounted. "Then they'd pop up in my bed whilst I was dallying with Nicky. It was damned distracting. They'd let the air out of my Jag tires. Some nights, just for variety, they'd put too much air in. I capitulated in about two weeks, quit the account, and I've been as happy as a clam ever since. Not that clams are very good in the sack."

"So you never met the Dacobras?"

When he shook his head, new wrinkles formed under his eyes. "As I told you, buddy, I never got beyond the goblin stage," he answered. "But from what I was able to learn discreetly—very discreetly—the outfit is run by one Vivian Dacobra, a mature lady in her fifties, and her son, E. Jack Dacobra. I also heard rumors that she'd made some sort of unsavory deal with the forces of evil. That was about the point when I lost interest in doing further research into Sunset-Dacobra."

I nodded. "Vivian Dacobra is a sorceress, well versed in black magic," I told him. "Mature she is, since her actual age is around 360."

"That is mature, yes. Think of all the back Social Security benefits the lady could collect if she admitted her true age," he observed. "And how the hell, if one may ask, do you know so much about this?"

"That's what I've been endeavoring to tell you between the automotive news bulletins, Paul."

He put down his fork and I started off by telling him about my goblin visitation of the night before. Then I explained that Heather Moon had come back into my life again.

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"That's good, right? From what you've told me before, you've had an abiding yen for this mystical lady for a decade or more."

"Since college, yeah. I dated Heather and she saved me from a bunch of demons. But this time — "

"It was right after college that you did that dumb thing, was it not?"

"I married Sue Smith," I said. "Heather is divorced now, too, and — "

"Oops. It just occurs to me that Heather Moon only recurs in your life when you're either involved or on the brink of being involved with demons, imps, or other unpleasant occult entities. She's, one might say, an omen of deep shit to come."

"Not this time, though," I said. "This time she wants *me* to help *her.*"

"You don't practice magic," he pointed out, "or even do card tricks."

"This has to do, in a way, with my career, sort of."

"Your present career as a screenwriter, you mean?"

"Okay, I've only sold two movie scripts since I quit writing sitcom scripts, but that's the career I'm talking about."

"How's the latest script coming, by the way?"

"Great. Oskar Quintoon, who heads up Rudigore Productions, loves my second draft even better than the first draft. He's going to try to get Vincent Price to star in *The Cabinet of Count Monstrodamus.*"

"Count Monstrodamus, the notorious eighteenth-century wizard," he said. "Would that be why Heather Moon paid a call?"

"It is, yeah. She got wind I was working for Quintoon and — "

"How'd she get wind—tarot cards, crystal ball, telepathy?"

"Actually, she read about it in the trades," I said. "The rarest book the count ever wrote is entitled *The Most Foul and Evil Black Magic Spells of the Nefarious and Notorious Satan Worshipper, Noneother Than the Vile and Eternally Damned Count Monstrodamus.*"

"Catchy title."

"The point is there are only three known copies of the book in existence in the entire world," I continued. "One is in the hands of Vivian Dacobra. By using certain spells that appear *only* in the count's book, Vivian has been able to achieve powers even greater than what Heather and all her family can summon up."

"How'd dear Viv get hold of a copy of such a rare book?"

"Bought one when it first came out in 1797," I replied. "There's one

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other copy in the British Museum, kept locked away in their *Vile and Forbidden Books* wing. The only other is in the collection of my producer Oskar Quintoon, who's got one of the biggest collections of occult and supernatural — "

"Bingo. I begin to see why Heather Moon has reinstated herself in your humdrum life," Arkadian said. "She needs to consult that book and since you're both a chum and employee of Quintoon's, you can get her into his mansion for a peek."

"Well, something like that, yeah," I admitted. "But we're also, more or less, friends, too."

"And what does she need from this forbidden book?"

"There's a spell in the damned thing that, so Heather believes, can cancel most all of Vivian and E. Jack's powers."

"If she could do that, I could pitch the Little Miss Muffin account again," he said, brightening. "Just why, though, does Heather Moon want to toss a spanner in the Sunset-Dacobra works?"

"Personal reasons."

"E. Jack make a play for her?"

"Among other things."

"So you intend to escort her over to Quintoon's for a look at this rare book?"

"He's having a party at his place in Bel Air tomorrow night. I was invited and I'm taking Heather," I said. "She's got ulterior motives, but I'm thinking of it as a date."

"Good luck," he said. "But keep a weather eye out for goblins."

"YOU'RE SURE you don't mind our driving to Quintoon's party?" I said, guiding my second-hand Mercedes 220S up into Bel Air.

This was one of those hot, windy nights, with a rough Santa Ana wind blowing.

"Driving as opposed to what?" Heather asked. She was looking very pretty, wearing a simple black cocktail dress.

"Well, you could teleport us or — "

"I like to save teleportation for emergencies," she said, smiling faintly, leaning back in her seat. "I really appreciate your dragging me to

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this party tonight, Will. None of my other clients happen to know Oskar Quintoon at all well and so — "

"Hey, I'm not exactly dragging you. I consider you my date and — "

"We haven't dated since college," she said. "So this is something of an occasion, huh?"

"All right, okay. I made some mistakes back then," I acknowledged. "Biggest mistake was to quit seeing you and then marrying Sue Smith. It didn't take me long to realize that was an error of judgment."

"You probably do need a bland, completely conventional girl like Sue, though, don't you think? As I recall, your friends and fraternity brothers considered me a very strange girl."

"Screw them," I said. "I was stupid back then and I'm glad you've reappeared in my life."

She smiled. "Well, now that you mention it, so am I."

I noticed that in spite of the hot wind, a fog was starting to spill across the winding road. "Has E. Jack Dacobra bothered you since the other night?"

Sighing, she said, "Oh, he was lurking out in the back yard and howling last evening. Uncle Alfie tossed a bucket of water on him, but it didn't help much. And, as you know, I don't have access to a spell potent enough to send him packing."

"Howling? What shape did he take?"

"He was a wolf this time, I think. Something large and gray and shaggy."

"He doesn't stalk you as himself?"

"Used to, but we got a cease and desist and he had to quit hanging around in his own person," she explained. "It's tough, though, to get a restraining order against a wolf or a huge German shepherd."

"You could call the cops."

"We did that a few times, but he always vanishes before they show up."

Slowing the car, I flicked on the windshield wipers. The fog was closing in. "And what he wants exactly is...."

"Me," she said. "As I told you the other night, Will, the guy met me at a party in Malibu about three months ago. He started pressuring me to go out with him. I tried to explain I don't date guys who are devil

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worshippers and practice the worst kind of black magic. Besides he's too old."

"How old?"

"Uncle Alfie looked him up in his crystal ball and E. Jack is actually 127. He isn't really Vivian's son, though he poses as such. She picked him up in Vienna in the 1890s and they were originally lovers."

"You told me that Vivian wants you to work for her."

"She's sensed that I'm a true magician, yes. So she'd be very pleased if I came to work for Sunset-Dacobra," she said, hugging herself and shivering once. "The agency isn't big yet, but it's Vivian's ambition to control most of Hollywood eventually. She figures I could help her a lot."

"You can stop her."

"With the help of that spell in Count Monstrodamus's book, I'm pretty sure I can fix her and E. Jack, too."

"Well, you'll get a look at that soon as...Oh, Christ."

"Pull over," she advised.

A giant galvanized orange had materialized out of the fog. It was squatting smack in the middle of the road.

This time the neon sign read simply BEWARE!

"Why she keeps relying on these dippy goblins I don't really know." Heather rolled down the window on her side. From her purse she took a talisman that looked somewhat like a Celtic cross. Holding it out into the fog, she recited, "Begone, foul goblins. Plague us no more." She recited a few lines of Latin, made a few gestures with the cross.

The big metal orange bounced a few times, teetered far to the left. Then it exploded and was gone.

Three over-ripe oranges came hurtling out of the mist to squash against my windshield.

As the fog lifted, I said, "One hurdle passed."

"The first of many, I'm afraid," she said.

Heather hesitated on the first step of the curving marble stairway that led up to the front door of Oskar Quintoon's multilevel glass and redwood mansion. The night wind fluttered her long auburn hair.

Behind us an attendant in a gold jacket was driving my Mercedes away toward a parking spot.

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"You're certain this is Quintoon's place?" Heather asked, taking hold of my arm.

"Sure, I've been here several times, talking about my script for *The Cabinet of Count Monstrodamus,*" I assured her. "What's wrong?"

"Maybe nothing." She shivered again, then gave a resigned shrug. "C'mon, let's go in."

Slowly we climbed the stairs. I asked, "Did you sense something?"

"I'm not sure. It's very vague," she answered. "Let's just get a look at the book and get the heck out of here."

"We can do that." I looked at her face and it was very pale.

There were well over fifty people already gathered in Quintoon's immense glass-sided living room. Movie people mostly and a few aerospace execs. At the piano a frail, bald man was playing in a pretty fair imitation of Bud Powell. There was the faint scent of pot in the air and one of Quintoon's Chinese houseboys was passing around a tray of small, round sandwiches. A lean dark man in a white jacket was acting as bartender over against the far wall. I couldn't see Quintoon himself anywhere.

Heather's frown deepened as she said quietly, "Something's not right."

"All of Quintoon's parties look like this."

The houseboy approached us. "Lobster salad sandwich, Mr. Harkins?"

I started to reach for one, then noticed that his right thumb, which was gripping the edge of the silver tray, was starting to sprout fur and take on a distinct goblin appearance. "No, thanks. I'm allergic to seafood actually."

"And you, Miss Moon?"

"Pass." Her grip on my arm tightened.

Leaning close to her, I said, "I'm commencing to agree with you about something going on wrong."

She said, "These are not really the guests. The Dacobras have taken over somehow and substituted their own."

"Meaning this is a trap for you."

"For both of us, I'm afraid."

Nodding, I suggested, "Suppose we, very casually, make our way up to Quintoon's library on the second level? We'll grab the Count Monstrodamus book and scram."

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"We may not even have time for that chore, Will."

By now we were in the middle of the living room.

I noticed, which didn't cheer me at all, that the fellow at the piano had green scaly claws now. He still managed to sound like Bud Powell, though.

Up at the top of the curving indoor staircase a dark-haired, very pale woman in a scarlet cloak had appeared. She was vaguely handsome and looked to be in her mid-fifties.

"Vivian Dacobra?" I inquired.

"Herself," answered Heather. "Okay, I'm going to teleport us clean out of here. Hang on."

"Must you two leave so soon?" asked Vivian Dacobra.

Everyone else fell silent. The huge lizard quit playing the piano, the goblin ceased passing out little sandwiches. The bartender had shed his skin and off in the shadowy corners some of the guests were reverting to their true shapes.

After reciting a few phrases of what I think was ancient Greek, Heather whispered, "Here we go."

The party began to blur. I saw sudden crackling zigzags of multi-colored light and felt as though I was smack in the center of a huge animated Stuart Davis painting.

My ears popped. Light was replaced by darkness.

I heard a creaking and found myself sitting on my low white sofa back home in my beach cottage. "That's terrific, Heather," I said, laughing with relief. "You got us out of...."

Then I realized she hadn't returned with me. I was alone.

I WAITED another five minutes, increasingly certain that Heather wasn't going to show up. Then I called her home phone, although it was doubtful she'd teleported there instead of here. I hung up after the sixth ring.

"They got her," I said. "She was able to get me out, but they stopped her."

Heather'd given me her telephone number, but not that of her Uncle Alfie. I was asking the operator for Bayside information when I heard coat hangers, shoeboxes, and paperback books rattling and tumbling in my hall closet.

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Pronging the phone, I took a deep breath and, gingerly, went into the hallway.

"I'm really not in the mood for any more goblins," I told the closed door.

"Nor am I, my boy. We're in absolute accord on that." The door was pushed open. "Matter of fact, I'm growing weary of lycanthropes, too."

He was a heavyset man, about the same height as I was. He had a plump pinkish face and very wavy white hair.

"Who might you be? And, more importantly, how'd you get in my closet?"

"Poor aim," he answered. "I was intending to materialize in your parlor, Will, my lad."

"You teleported here?"

"Exactly, yes. It's gratifying to find someone who takes supernatural manifestations in his stride and doesn't stand around gaping and — "

"Then you're probably Uncle Alfie."

"That's absolutely who I am," he confirmed, stepping fully out onto the hall carpeting. "Heather's beloved uncle and mentor."

"I was just trying to phone you. To tell you that — "

"The Dacrobras have snatched my niece and are holding her prisoner in their Moorish style mansion in Beverly Hills."

"I didn't know that last part."

"That's because you don't have a crystal ball." Uncle Alfie reached into his crowded coat pocket and produced a tennis ball. "No, that's not it. I thought it felt too fuzzy." He tried another pocket and, after retrieving a handful of assorted jawbreakers, located a palm-fitting crystal. He winced as he held it up toward me. "Thing's been overheating lately."

I pointed at it. "You can see where Heather is in that thing?"

"Certainly, my boy," he answered. "Once I became aware of her fate, I felt it was expedient to consult with you."

"Vivian Dacobra stopped her somehow from teleporting back here with me," I explained to Heather's uncle. "I'm not sure what they have in — "

"They are, at this very moment, trying to convince the lass to join the Sunset-Dacobra organization."

"She'll never do that."

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"It's unlikely," he agreed, "but they'll do some pretty vile things while striving to convince her. Eventually, I fear, they'll destroy her."

"So how do we rescue her?"

"We have to procure a copy of the spell in Count Monstrodamus's vile book." He headed into my living room, seated himself on the low white sofa.

"As you know, Oskar Quintoon has a copy." I followed him into the room. "Heather and I didn't get a chance to consult it, but if you and I go back there — "

"Alas, no, lad. Vivian and E. Jack left all the real guests in trances down in the wine cellar," he informed me, "and also swiped your producer's copy of the book."

"Okay, Heather says there's another copy in the British Museum," I said, starting to pace. "You can teleport that over here, can't you?"

"Not unless," he said, shaking his head, "I see it first and get a look at the exact location."

"Okay, then you can teleport yourself over to London, take a look, swipe the book by magical means, and get the hell back here."

"I'm afraid I can no longer span continents, not to mention oceans, in a single hop, Will," Uncle Alfie sadly informed me. "Fact is, I haven't made a transatlantic hop in nearly five years. Not since the time I aimed for Paris and ended up bobbing in the surf off one of the lesser Azore Islands."

"Then why did you come to see me? We have to do something to rescue Heather and so far, Uncle Alfie, all you're giving me is — "

"Have faith, my boy," he said. "I had a premonition that coming here was the thing to do."

"So while you're exploring some half-assed hunch, these bastards are torturing Heather and — "

"Ah, hold on, Will." He gestured in the direction of my telephone. "This phone call is exactly what we're waiting for."

"What phone call?" The phone rang and I grabbed it up. "Yeah?"

"How did the party go, buddy?" inquired Arkadian. "Did you and Miss Moon get hold of that copy of the Count Monstrodamus book?"

"No, but why are you — "

"There's another copy here."

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"You can't be at the British Museum?"

"Nope, I'm attending the birthday party of Lawrence J. Bannerman, publisher of *Hollywood Horrors Magazine,*" replied my friend. "He collects all sorts of horror ephemera and — "

"There are only three copies of that book in the world."

"Three originals, sure. But what Bannerman owns is a Photostat copy made for him, on the sly, by the rare book dealer who sold Quintoon his copy."

"This is terrific news, Paul. I'll explain why later," I told him. "Tell Bannerman we'll be right over to take a look at it. Where's the guy live?"

Arkadian gave us a Pasadena address, adding, "That's near the route of the Rose Bowl parade."

"I'll watch out for stray floats. See you as soon as possible."

"Perhaps," suggested Heather's white-haired uncle, "I can teleport the two of us to Pasadena."

"Your aim hasn't been all that great lately," I reminded. "We'll drive. Oops! My car's still at Quintoon's."

"No problem," he said. "I'll teleport it back here for you."

Shortly before the fog started closing in I said, "You probably shouldn't have torn that page out of the book."

"It was the most expedient way to acquire the spell we need, my boy," answered Uncle Alfie. "We're racing against time, keep in mind."

"You took time to visit the john while we were at Bannerman's."

"Frequent visits are a necessity at my age."

"You could simply have copied the spell. Matter of fact, while you were — "

"I can never read my own handwriting."

We were driving higher up into Beverly Hills and the mist was starting to surround my car. "You think maybe this fog is a prelude to goblins?"

He made an annoyed noise. "Probably so, since we're less than a half mile from the Dacobra manse and — "

Mushy fruit—oranges, apples, and something prickly I couldn't identify—started sailing out of the night to whap my hood and windshield.

"Reminds me of my brief career in vaudeville," observed Uncle Alfie. He located a stick of incense in the breast pocket of his coat. He rolled open

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the window, lit the incense with a wood match and tossed the smoking stick out into the fog.

"No incantations with that?"

"Heather prefers using a traditional spell, but I find the little buggers can't stand this particular odor." He shut the window.

The pelting with fruit ceased, the mist rose up into the night and vanished.

"Drive up around the back of the joint," advised Heather's uncle. "They're anticipating us, but it's easier to sneak in via the back way. And there's much less broken glass on the rear wall."

WE GOT OVER the wall, and the broken glass, with relative ease. Uncle Alfie simply levitated both of us and we floated gently up and over the eight-foot adobe wall.

I'd never been levitated before and it produced, briefly, some stomach cramps.

Soon as we landed on the wooded half-acre behind the two-story red tile and stucco house, hounds began barking and growling quite nearby.

Their approaching footfalls shook the ground as they came pounding through the brush toward us.

There were three. Two were dark hounds, eyes glowing red and smoke swirling from their nostrils. The third was an extremely large snarling gray German shepherd.

"The one with the collar is E. Jack," Uncle Alfie pointed out, raising both arms out in front of him.

"Let me handle him." From my coat I took the spell I'd copied from *The Most Foul and Evil Black Magic Spells of the Nefarious and Notorious Satan Worshipper, Noneother Than the Vile and Eternally Damned Count Monstrodamus* while Uncle Alfie had been in the bathroom.

Snapping my fingers, I got E. Jack's attention. So much so that he came galloping straight at me.

There wasn't much moonlight, but by squinting I was able to recite the spell. It was in, I'm nearly certain, a mixture of Greek and Persian. Count Monstrodamus had helpfully provided a pronunciation guide after each word.

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E. Jack, in his hound form, was leaping for my throat, fangs bared, as I read the final phrase.

He seemed to halt in midair, then he yelped and dropped to the grass. Rolling over on his shaggy back, he produced some whimpering.

"Nice boy," I said, bending and rubbing his stomach. "Go over and sit by the potting shed for a while."

Panting, E. Jack rose up and went trotting off.

"Admirable job, my boy," said Heather's uncle.

"I happened to notice another spell in the count's book," I explained. "Guaranteed to keep E. Jack locked in his hound format forever. And also make him docile and obedient."

"Very efficient reading of the spell, although you pronounced a few of the Portuguese words incorrectly. Worked anyway."

I glanced around. "What happened to the other two dogs?"

"Oh, they were hellhounds, demonic dogs from the lower depths," he said. "I exploded them by sprinkling each with an old Egyptian elixir that I carry around for just such emergencies. They exploded with considerable fireworks."

"I guess I was too preoccupied with hexing E. Jack to notice."

Slipping his crystal out of a pocket, he said, "Now let's double-check on dear Heather's location."

The crystal ball lit up, glowing a pale bluish white. An image of Heather took shape. She was lying, apparently unconscious, on an ornate brass bed in a white-walled room.

Uncle Alfie held up the crystal to me for a moment before stuffing it back into his pocket. "Second floor bedroom around on the side of this pest hole." He started trotting in that direction.

I caught up with him beside a large plashing fountain. A marble sea nymph was toting a dolphin who was spewing water enthusiastically into the fishpond below.

"We'll try a variation on the old floating lady stunt," decided Heather's portly uncle as he raised both arms and pointed all ten fingers in the direction of an unlit second floor window.

I heard a muffled rattling, then the wrought iron grillwork guarding the window came popping free to tumble down to the dark grass and bounce once. The window, seemingly on its own, opened wide.

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Then, in a stiff horizontal position, Heather came floating out into the night. Her unconscious body hovered up there, then gradually drifted down toward me.

"Catch her, my boy."

I did and she murmured faintly but did not awaken. "What's wrong with her?" I asked.

"The same thing, dear heart, that shall soon be wrong with you two oafs."

Silently Vivian Dacobra had materialized on the other side of the gurgling fountain. She was wearing a night-blue cloak and her lean face glowed white.

"I feel compelled to warn you, madam," began Uncle Alfie as he dug into one of his cluttered pockets, "that unless you leave Greater Los Angeles, after first freeing my dear niece from this foul spell, I shall be forced to — "

"Up your snoot, you old bastard."

"Me old? Ironic that someone who's lived several centuries since her first birthday should — "

"The spell," I reminded, shifting my grip on Heather.

"Got it here someplace." He was still rummaging in a pocket.

Laughing, Vivian raised her left hand. "You'll all make excellent employees for Sunset-Dacobra," she announced. "You, Harkins, we can utilize as a typist and stenographer. The old gent might — "

"Ah, here it is." Unfolding the borrowed page, he commenced reciting. This spell included Latin, Middle English, Persian and, maybe, a little Portuguese.

"Do you honestly believe that such a trite amalgam of outmoded mumbo jumbo can possibly...." Vivian paused, lowering her hand and clutching at her midsection. A look of pain was spreading across her pale white face.

"Reach into my coat pocket," urged Uncle Alfie out of the side of his mouth. "We'd best sprinkle some rosemary and thyme on the old girl at this point.

Placing Heather gently on the dark grass, I poked into one of his pockets and came out with a small cylindrical bottle. "This says *Italian Seasoning.*"

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"Exactly what we need. Apply it, quick." He continued reciting the Count Monstrodamus spell.

Twisting off the bottle lid, I skirted the fountain and tossed a handful of the herbs at the now doubled-up sorceress.

When the flecks hit her cloak dazzling sparks were given off. Vivian sank to her knees.

Uncle Alfie reached the conclusion of the spell and lowered the borrowed page to glance across at Vivian.

"I'll put," she said in a thin, gasping voice, "a curse on all...all...."

She fell against the fountain. When her head hit the marble edge of the pond, it made unsettling crackling sounds. Wrinkles began spreading across her face. Her skin grew brittle and began to flake.

Then she started to disintegrate, turning to a foul-smelling pile of dust that the night wind blew into the water and across the grass.

"When three hundred years catches up with you," observed Uncle Alfie, folding up the spell, "it really catches up."

I sprinted over to Heather. "What about her?" I asked, kneeling beside her.

She sat up. "I'm okay," she told me, reaching out to hug me. "Once Vivian was gone, the spell she put on me ended."

I put my arms around her. "I'm glad of that."

"I'm sort of pleased myself," she said, kissing me on the cheek. "And thanks for coming to rescue me."

"I had a little help from your Uncle Alfie."

"Even so," she said, smiling.

I leaned closer and kissed her.

"Ah, I truly love these romantic endings," said Uncle Alfie, sighing.

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Sometimes by design, but usually by chance, issues of F&SF *seem to wind up with themes linking the stories in most issues. This month's offerings have turned out to be more intellectual than usual—hey, the issue comes complete with footnotes. Ms. Emshwiller's new story fits in with this cerebral theme. It also cuts right to the important questions of life: Who are we? Why are we here? What sort of head gear should we wear?*

The Project

By Carol Emshwiller

FOR GENERATIONS OUR wives have said, "What? *What!* Why are you men always adoing and adoing, such that you are hither and thither all the time while we harvest and chop, set the traps, make the ropes for the bridges and the ropes for the slings and nets — we even make the ropes for the Project?"

I always answer, "Men are adoing."

This is the second project. The first failed. The remnants of it lie in the canyons. Only our grandfathers remember. Our boys think the grandfathers failed because they didn't know as much as we know now, but I think they had tricks and theories. Easy to see they were as smart as we are. I've seen their shattered boulders. Some are even larger than our largest, or were before they fell. We no longer attempt to raise boulders of that size.

This has been a part of our lives for as long as even our oldest can remember. We can't think back to when the Project was not our main

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concern. Nor conceive of such a time. And why would we want to? Those days must have been useless days.

We are a strong people. You can see it in our noses. None but the strong could have stayed and lived here. Our hair is bleached by altitude. Our legs are stringy. Even our old ladies still jump from stone to stone. Our songs, unlike those of any other peoples, are full of hohs. Some say we don't sing at all, but only shout and growl.

First we built a fortress. This was so long ago we no longer understand its purpose. (We live within its crumbling walls.) Except for the mountain lion we have no enemies. And who but us would want land such as this with hardly a single flat spot larger than a split boulder?

That lion took our baby daughter. That's why my wife keeps saying, "What? *What!*" She blames me. "Had you been...! Had you but been...! Had you!"

I say, and I say it slowly, "*As. It. Is.* We've hardly enough men for the Project." There are but eighty. We need every single one on the ropes. The stone we raise now is the largest so far. Couldn't be done, they said and said, but we are doing it.

The evening our baby was taken, the owl flew low, looking huge in the moonlight. I thought I could reach up and touch its white underbelly. First I heard the flap of wings. First I thought it was a ghost. Then I thought, It's just an owl, not knowing that it really was a ghost, or soon would be.

As to the lion, my baby daughter must have made but a single mouthful.

I'm not the only one who has lost a child. This happens when game is scarce. It had been a dry winter. The pine nuts were few, so rodents are few. Grouse, hares, the sweet, gray foxes, few. Our wild mountain sheep, eaten to the last of them. We have to depend on our goats for everything now. (Would that my daughter had been penned up with the kids.)

(The blanket my wife was knitting is now for someone else's child.)

Since we lost our little girl my wife has been blaming me even for the lack of radishes.

"Not even trim the wicks," she says. "It's little enough," she says. "Do I shout?" she says. "Do I sit? Tired as I am, do I sit?"

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I say, "Tired as *I* am. Look how my eyes are shutting." I say, "Until you work at raising boulders, you will never understand such a tiredness as this."

Radishes! Wicks! Who would care but somebody's wife?

They said the stones are too big, the mountain top too high, lightning will strike, boulders will turn red, glow, and then crack as if to deafen. I say, "Yes, yes! *Of course!*"

Say what they wish, but it's easy to see all paths lead to our village. One has only to climb to our highest places and look down to see how true that is. We're not a way station alongside some path that goes someplace else. Therefore it's clear there is no need to go to some lower place and look for other happenings, so we have never gone.

Our catamount prowls wherever she wishes. Sometimes at night, I see her eyes shine. Disembodied. Steady on. Then a sudden freezing along the backbone, as if I saw a child on the brink of the brink.

The lion is young. We think she's only recently left the den of her birth. She's thin. It's the young ones, don't yet know what they're about, so all the more dangerous. She's the color of our boulders. She belongs — as much as we do. In fact more.

I'm a strong man. A big man. The biggest. Except for me we don't look like the people of the valley. We're smaller and wirier. I have never been down there, but now and then one of them climbs up here. We recognize them right away and not just because we know everybody who lives up here, but by their cheekbones and their wide open eyes. We know they're used to shadows because when we look down there, into their valley, we see how, every afternoon, our mountains shade them. We wonder what they're up to here in the up instead of down in their the down.

Down there they call us, "The people of the goats, or of the mountain sheep." They even call us, "The people of the catamount." We are more likely the people of the dinner of the catamount.

My wife says, "Shouldn't the Project be the lion? Shouldn't the lion be first so our little ones can sleep in peace or play capture the peak? If you'll not make the lion your project, then I'll make it mine."

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How can she? She can't even draw the bow. And as to the spear.... Women use spears as canes to steady themselves as they climb over rocks.

(One evening I saw our house cat leap up and pull a bat out of the air. I know what my wife will have to deal with.)

"If you don't go, I go. What do I have to wait for here waiting and waiting? For the cabbages to grow?"

Is she really going out to hunt lion, small as she is and always cold without me to warm her?

"Go," I say, "I'm busy with the Project. There will always be a beast, if not this one then another."

Yet I will follow. Even though I'm not only the foreman, but the most important puller and checker and the finest fitter of all, and my voice echoes out over the canyons louder than any, I will follow. My pock-marked face has made her my one and only. Even my size was against me with the women.

We men of the mountains are not like me. I'm teased that my father was not my father but that my mother was raped by some valley man and never confessed it. "Out picking berries, one can not only come across a bear." Though they also say my father was a bear — a bald-headed bear. I'd rather that than some valley man.

My wife...even she would hardly be a mouthful for the lion. She's as small as I am large. Her name is Wren and she's like a wren.

Our women are named Lark, Titmouse, Towhee, Quail, Redstart, Killdeer.... (Killdeer because we so admire the broken wing trick and hope to see the same in the mothers of our children.) Our men are named for raptors: Vulture, Eagle, Hawk, Goshawk, Kestrel, Falcon, and such.

(Not Owl. We would never name anyone Owl.)

My name is Harrier. We named our baby Sparrow. Now I can hardly think that word.

I say, "It's the lion that will be stalking you."

"I will be adoing."

Always.... *Always* the women take our time from what's important. The Project will last for generations. Centuries. Perhaps forever. Even as long as our mountain remains a mountain. Women's thoughts are on the everyday. I want to say, "What about the monumental? Have you ever

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thought of that?" And I would say it except I already have and more times than I can count.

What I think as I follow my woman down and then up, and then up and down and down and up again, is: How fortunate to be alive so far! The turkey vulture soars. One tiny cloud. For a while a raven family keeps one step ahead. I'm thinking how the Milky Way is still up there shining all across the sky, there, even though you can't see it in the daytime. I'm needed elsewhere, but I will enjoy the day as it is right now, though my wife, my wren, hurries away from me with all my weapons.

Whenever I top a rise and look back I see them struggling. My group at the top — all the strongest pullers. I see skids and ramps and wedges, pulleys.... They won't make much headway without me. (I didn't ask leave to come, I just came. Who would want a wife out here in The Nowhere, much less in The Down?)

Did Wren look back and see I wasn't there? I would have been easy to spot because of my bulk. Now, as I look I can see that all are, just as they are, mountain men and small. No wonder they joke that I'm the bastard of a bald-headed bear.

She's easy to follow. We wear red, the mountain color. The better to be seen. She wears a red bonnet and her fuzzy red sweater. She has her boots and her mittens tied on the back of her pack. She wears moccasins, but crosses the streams barefoot and wipes her feet with a red towel. But I wear the color of the lion and stay well behind. The black straps of my pack across my chest, my wide black hat, imitate the cracks of the mountains and make me even more like a piece of half-split rock.

She goes lower, then climbs up again into a cozy pass, cozy black basalt cliffs on one side and tawny, more rounded granite on the other. Behind the black side, an iron oxide peak looms orange. There's several patches of frazzle ice to chew on. There are overhanging rocks. I'm thinking this is a good place for a lioness. Then I know this *is* the place. I don't know how I know but I can almost smell her.

Here is where my wife, my lion's mouthful, decides to spend the night. I guess if the lion finds it inviting, everyone would.

She doesn't look frightened as she settles in. I suppose one who has

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just lost a baby doesn't feel any fear for a long time afterward. Perhaps never.

I stay close. Then I come closer. I watch my wife sleep in the moonlight. All the nights since the baby died she hasn't slept much but now she does. As if the very danger is comforting. As if what has eaten our baby might eat her so the owl would fly again.

I take back my weapons, dress myself in a leather apron. Surely the lion will come. Surely the lion is here already.

I see her — first just eyes reflecting moonlight, then a shadow. She comes out from a low overhang, exactly where I thought she'd come from. I'd never have seen her if I hadn't suspected she'd come from there. She stands still and looks at me. Even though I knew...even though I hoped she'd be there, I feel that edge-of-a-cliff feeling, myself, about to fall. Or the Project about to come loose and crash down on us.

I want to lure her away from my wife, so, like the killdeer, I limp. Down from the cozy pass, down into the switchbacks below, behind boulders, away and lower. I don't want even the sounds...neither my sounds nor cat sounds.... But if we're this far down, why would my wife think they had anything to do with me? Many's the times we've awakened to the lion's midnight yowls, howls, screeches, caterwauling, up there near our village, and turned to each other, and said, "It's only the young lion, fresh out of her mother's den."

Why would my wife think anything of it except to reach for me and find me not there?

When we're far down, lioness and I, and in a flat clear place where trees are few and the moon shines through and I can see clearly, I turn.

It's this leather apron between me and claws that saves me. And, of course, the inexperience of the lioness.

She had a look in her eyes of wondering about the world. My daughter had the same. And when I killed her she had a look as if to say: I can't be, and already, dead. No doubt my daughter had the same when that moment came to her. When I saw that, I hesitated, but it was too late.

I carry her carcass to the side of the clearing. No doubt about it, she was starving. No doubt about it, she'd have come after my wife. Perhaps

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my wife wanted her to. Warmth to warmth, fur to skin, as lovers. Or herself as gift. Or simply to close a circle.

I limp back — this time the limping is real. I expected worse. I brought herbs and bandages in case. Back under the lioness's overhang, I bandage myself. I stow my weapons and the leather apron in a corner.

Then I go lie down, again not far from my wife to guard her. As I had told her, there will always be a beast somewhere out there at the edges of our lives.

Pain keeps me from sleeping. One can't get close to any sort of cat without having wounds.

I had thought my wife would turn around and go back, but she goes on. She doesn't know the lion is dead. Should I stop her? Try to? Tell her the lion will be gone to the buzzards before midday? Show myself? But one look at me and she'd know all there is to know. I'll not yet show myself.

I chafe with all this hithering and thithering. I regret every minute I spend away from the Project. We say, "What's worth the doing is worth dying for or why be adoing." I might well have died here in the middle of nowhere. I had always thought to die for the Project, not from cat scratchings.

My wife goes on down, not knowing she's stalking nothing. Might as well be following her own stepped-on mosses. Might as well look up and back and over her left shoulder for the special place where dead babies congregate for each other's company — all the dead babies who have just smiled their first smiles.

None of us know anything about The Down, and proud of it. There'll be bear. There'll be snakes and bugs and goodness knows what. Things we never heard of. Trees and bushes are already changing. And they grow closer together.

From here I get a good view of this flat land. Flat as far as you can see. We know nothing about it nor care to. We don't ponder fields, or horses or cows or plows. We say, "That which is highest is its own reward."

Those big ugly men, hunking around down there. Altitude makes them puff. Their lips turn blue. We offer them our best food knowing they'll refuse. Always halfway along that last and steepest climb to our fortress, they throw up.

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If they can't see the importance of the Project then there's no explaining it, neither to them nor to our women who keep saying, "What in the world!" and, "Why! Why ever!"

I told her and I told her, you can't stalk a cat. Where does she think she's on the way to? Does she want to see for herself all that we are proud not knowing? Or is it that (curious as a wife) she simply wants to find something different?

And she already has. I never saw flowers as large as these. I see her peer and sniff. I see her stroke the velvet of the petals. She leans as she leaned over our baby.

I do. I do love her.

I climb a mound and look back (mound is all one can call these lumps of The Down. These silly hills make me even more proud to be a mountain man.) I can't see my men anymore, nor pulleys nor ropes, but the Project is clear, bright white against the sky. Exactly as we planned it. When we cap it with that last and largest boulder, we'll have done the impossible.

My wife stands and looks and listens. She imitates the call of a bird I never heard before. (She can imitate all the bird calls in the mountains, but this is a new sound to us.) I see she's here for whatever she can find that's different. There'll be no stopping her. She studies the ground and then steps carefully so as not to crush anything, even something small.

I'm beginning to feel as she must be feeling, that this is to be seen and known about. I look around as she looks around. The sky is flatter than I thought. Distances are different. I'll have to walk it to understand it.

And there the hornèd cows. Without them I'd not have had a leather apron tough enough to save me.

But this is *our* water. It all comes from us. As we climbed down, always we heard rushing water sounds and thought nothing of it because, up in our village, it is the sound of our daily life. Here they've forced it into straight lines all across their land. Until now, I had wondered what those straight lines were. Nothing is as straight up there except split rocks. When the sun shined all the way down here, I had thought the waterways were of silver and that that is where our bracelets came from.

My wife has hurried on as though to reach some new thing before

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some other new thing, but it'll be dark soon. She will have to find a bedding down place even here in this pasture land. Once away from the mounds, there's not a single boulder. None have rolled this far. But now and then there are trees and sometimes bushes, especially along the ditches that tame our water. My wife finds a place to hide. She has already taken off all her red, back in the lower hills.

What will they be thinking of her here, where everything is large? And what will they think of her trousers and her fine bleached hair? I, being the size I am, could hide as one of them, whereas she could never. Except I wouldn't know how to live here. What do you say to a horse? What do you whistle to send a dog off and around? And what of bulls? I've heard things of bulls.

They say time is different down here. It goes at a faster walk. In The Up our steps are slower because the ground is rough. But even these people of The Down can't walk away from time.

Before she goes to hide in her bushes she studies the moon. I see that she sees as I do — how life depends on water and on sky. She gestures, one palm up. She seems to make a wish. We say to children, catch a moon beam, make a wish, but you need a pinch of mountain aster for it to come true.

I lie down, next bush to her. This time I do sleep. Though I wonder, what of bulls? And what of dogs and how large do they grow down here?

This time, when I finally wake, she's stepping away from the shelter of the trees. She's in red again, showing herself on purpose. Nearby, at the edge of the field, there's what I know is a plow. We have none such. She stands beside it. I'm so stiff and sore I can hardly get up but I do.

Here, already, there's a flatland man coming straight toward her. The man is riding sideways on one of those horse things. I had not known there'd be so much hair at the ankles. All kinds of straps hang down. So many one wonders how he knows to hook them up. He jumps off and leads the horse to the plow and to my wife.

They stand one to one. They speak. He, with the swallowed Rs of the Down and no clicks on the Ks. He calls her, Little Lady. "Little Lady of the mountains." He reaches out his fingers. Is it as if to be smelled? Does he think she's an animal?

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I can see he looks like me. Except no pock marks. (I could never grow a decent beard because of that. His is decent.) For a moment I see myself as if a long time ago when I hated my size as everyone else did, and said so to my face. There came a time, though, when I won every fistfight. Then they hated me even more, but that all changed when I was old enough to work on the Project. I was foreman at seventeen. This man would scare every mountain man but me. He's even larger than I am, but my muscles are the muscles of those who lift boulders.

He and my wife reach out slowly. Touch hands as if the other is a miracle of strangeness. Then he reaches as if to touch her bleached hair. Reaches but doesn't touch, though almost. Her hair has hardly any color, not enough to call it yellow.

Something is happening between them. Something instant of the instant.

"I want to see," my wife says, "all the things of here."

I will show myself. I will risk as Wren does, whatever it is they do to people from Up, but mostly risk so my wife will see my miserable condition and know that I've saved her. I look at myself...my bandages leaking, my shredded sleeves and trousers, shredded everywhere where the apron didn't cover. My limp is not a pretense. My legs wobble. If I fall it won't be on purpose. Will either of them notice?

Does she understand what we add up to, I and my sweet Wren? That I've saved her and all the village and the children can play capture the peak? For now until some other beast comes around.

I will speak. I will say, As to the two of us. As to us....

And I do speak, but what I say is, "As to myself and the Project and the meaning of it...." For a moment it's as if the Project is before me, just as it has been every day and all the days of my life until now, shining, polished white against our sky, which is of a darker blue than this pale blue of the Down. The Project as hub of all paths. I think to say more of the things that are important, but I start to shake. I go down on my knees.

They turn to me. I see my wife seeing what I wanted her to see. She says, "Oh!"

But he says, "*You!*" and again, "*You!*"

It's he who comes to me, lifts me and hugs me as if a brother found at

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last, kisses each cheek before I have time to think to pull away. I haven't the strength to anyway. This is not the mountain people's way. The horse leans and noses me. I don't know if he'll bite or not. His head is much bigger than I thought a horse's head would be and bonier.

Though I'm almost as big as this man, he lifts me over his shoulder and then pushes me up upon the creature. Sits me sideways. (The creature is warm as a wife. Warm as the lion was when I carried her away from the trail.) The man walks us toward the village. The movement of the horse is painful to my scratches. I gasp, but my wife is looking up at this man, not at me. She walks beside him as though it was the most natural thing in the world to be crossing this flat land with grass all over it, with a stranger, and with me on a horse.

Other men, sideways on their horses are coming out, one by one and two by two, to their fields. As we meet the first, the man says, "Here's our long lost bastard half brother. We've waited all this time for him to come back to us. And doesn't he look just like his father?"

I want to say, A bear! A bear was my father, but I'm too tired and sick to protest. I think my wife should do it for me considering the state I'm in. I want her to say how I'm a mountain man; how, if could I walk, you would see it in my walk; and if I spoke, you would hear it in my words, but I fear she may no longer be proud of our mountains, though she knows full well the mountains are where everything begins, where even this very water, here in this very roadside ditch, rolls down from, even where the weather is engendered, else why would clouds hang at their tops? How can it be that one look in one single moment to one man almost as ugly as I am, is enough to change her mind?

I must protest. I don't know how much these people know of important things. Perhaps there's no such thing as marriage as we know it up there. We always say they're in need of speeches down here, so I begin, even just to these two men and these two horses who swivel their ears toward me, listening. I had not thought to mention the Project, but I do. I say, "How would we know anything without the Project be the reasons for it? How figure elevations so as to know the highest and therefore most important of all the mountains?"

But my wife interrupts me right in the middle of it, "What are you saying! Even here among the strangers of the Down, you speak of such

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things! Here, sick and bloodied, and having done it for my sake, even as you faint, you speak of unimportant things!"

I say, "You speak as if of turnips."

"Make a speech if you must, but you would miss my turnips if I never grew them."

If she loves me still, or ever has, it's for everyday things that amount to very little. I lose hope. I, the foreman of the Project, the killer of the lion, having made everybody safer, fall.

I must have fainted at that very moment of losing heart, because of it in fact. Next thing I know I'm in a bed and a large dog is licking my face.

I've been washed and rebandaged. My scratches no longer hurt. I'm covered with a quilt the likes of which I've never seen. It's as light as if a froth. There's a smell of stew. I had not thought the Down would be as comfortable as this.

A woman sits near me. She's dressed in long skirts and no red at all unless you count her rough red hands. They're as large as mine, and are in her lap with her darning. Her face is wide and flat as the wide flat land that must have made it so.

And here's my wife, also wearing the skirts of the Down and no red. (Those skirts must snag and tangle in their legs. They will have to be holding them out of the way.) She looks so odd I have the thought that she'll even talk as they do. I wonder what she's been doing as I've been lying here unconscious.

She comes to me from stirring pots, still holding a wooden spoon. She pushes the dog aside so that he licks my hand instead, and tries to get under the bandages. "So," she says, "and after all this time."

I don't know if she means that I've finally awakened or that I've finally killed the lion.

"The catamount! The catamount!"

The way she looks at me.... Her eyes must seem strange to the people down here, they are the bleached blue of us mountain people (except for mine), but she looks at me as though *I* am the stranger. She says, "So you finally."

I think to tell her something of my love so I say, "I have feelings for more than just the Project."

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She shakes her head, disgusted. She's still...even *still,* put out with me. Is there no gratefulness? From anyone? Lions can roam great distances, even in a single night, and they're not easy to kill. It not only takes skill, but also a willingness to end up with scratches and gashes, top to bottom. Our lioness may well have taken children from here also. All peoples will have profited from my daring.

"I have risked the killing of it."

"Did you know, all this time, your name isn't Harrier? Has never been? They've kept track of you down here. You're easily seen from halfway up. The large in you belongs to them. Look how this chair is large. Look at the bed. Look how even their pots and pans are large." She waves the spoon at me. "Here, look, a spoon as if for a giant."

"I have risked," I say and then I turn away. She turns away, too, and lets the dog lick my face again. At least the dog. At least him.

Time goes along here as there and I recover some. First I can do little more than sit outside, I and the dog, his big wide flatland head on my lap. It's just as I used to sit of an evening up home with a dog all the way on my lap. I sit and learn things of the Down. I hadn't thought there'd be so much noise down here. Even all night long, cows and horses, dogs running off barking at things yipping with high voices. We don't have coyotes up there.

Later I walk around and see things. There's both more and less mystery to it. I see how a plow works, how to yell out to cattle and yet keep them calm. "Curious as a cow," they say down here, and it's true, every time I hobble down their road, cows come to see what I'm about and then follow me.

The people call me Hosh. It has no relationship to any bird that I know of.

It seems Wren has become a sort of personage down here. I think because of her eyes and her size and that she's bleached all over and that her fingers are long and graceful. Since she has few skills besides knitting and cooking and looking out for goats, what other reason can there be? Her grace should be for my eyes and none other. Her hair also, for me only. Her cheeks.... (I saw that first man we met, he's called Boffin...I saw him touch

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her cheeks, one forefinger on each side of her face, as if he thought to measure her.)

(Why have they named me something without one of their endings on it, as Boffin, Duggan, Mawlin, and Algun? Is it to insult me? Do they laugh behind their hands at the shortness of my name every time they say it?) I'll not be brother to the likes of them who look at Wren the way they do.

So then I look at these women swishing around in their skirts (as Wren is swishing now also). They've fed me, spoonful by spoonful, washed me.... They have salves for my lacerations. They've been doing all the things that Wren should have been doing. They even look at me as Wren looks at Boffin, but everything about them only reminds me of myself. Even their necks are as wide as my own. I could borrow their shoes.

Every day I wonder, where is Wren? When I see her in the distance, I always take her for one of their children at first, before I see it's her. There's always several men around her. I've killed the lion only for her.

There comes a day of bad weather. Thunder and lightning, off and on hail even, right here in the Down as if on the mountains. *Our* weather — they say so themselves — come all the way down here, just as our water does.

Rain is so rare everybody is out to see it and feel it protected only by their sun hats. Even I, though I've already seen more of it than I need to. Clouds roil. The light is as if twilight. We all stand outside looking toward the mountains.

And then, out from under thunderheads, *exactly* over the Project, only there, the weather suddenly clears. It's as if the Project had done it. There's only that one place with blue sky, and I see.... Yes, it is! The capstone *is* raised. *Perpendicular!* Atop the eight holding stones. Around it, a circle of clear weather, as though caused by it. And why not? With that last boulder the Project is the highest of all the peaks surrounding it.

In my wildest speculations I hadn't thought such beauty. I'd thought: monumental, majestic, exalted even, but not this loveliness. And from down here, such delicacy. And with the sun on it, such sparkle. This will show my wife the importance of important things, and the need. What would the sky be without it? Just look at the faces of the people. And my wife, as wide-eyed as any of them.

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"There!" I say, "That's what we mean. Look! That's what I've always meant. Can you say it wasn't worth it?"

Even so, wide-eyed as she is, and all glittery with the look of *our Project*.... Even so, she leans toward me and whispers, "But Sparrow."

"And I'm not there," I say. I know I sound as though I don't care about Sparrow. It's that I don't know what to say. What can I say? What should I answer? I say, "But I'm not even there."

She says, shouting, "Don't shout!"

Everybody looking up. Every single one of them — stunned at first, rain and tears flowing down their faces. Then the lightning lights their grins. They're saying, "Well, well, *well!*" and, "The little brothers of the Up have done it," and other things of that nature. They pat me on the back. Little pat, pat, pats. *Pats!* As if it hadn't taken years. Generations. As if it wasn't a grand and noble, even an impossible thing. Do they realize the Project will be there longer than their little lives? Do they know I was the foreman?

I limp away, I and the dog. I've done with them.

They have their arms around each other's shoulders. They're in a circle doing a skipping sort of dance, which, seeing how big they are, makes them look more ridiculous than ever.

(They'll be dancing up there, too, stamping, jumping, also in a circle, though not touching. There was a special beer saved for just this day.)

"Hosh," they say, and they open a space for me in their dance. "Little brother. Come."

To have more pats?

They say I'm not well enough to return, but I'm done with their over-watered fields (wasting *our* water), their slippery grass where even the horses skid and go down, let alone the people. On the mountain we have more dangerous dangers, but they're dangers more to my taste.

If, for instance, some night we should steal a horse and ride out, fast, through the long straight flat places.... (I have said to myself and long before, that I wouldn't return without Wren.)

I'll tell her I've loved her just as if she was the Project and for as long. Since she's finally seen it as it should be seen, she'll understand the importance of my love. How it sparkles. How it will last beyond either of us.

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But she won't come. I know it ahead of time. Yet again she'll say, "What, *what!*"

I'll say, "I killed the lioness only for you."

She'll humpf.

(It's the dog will follow me as a wife should. Try to. He's old and arthritic. He likes somebody who limps. We'll be two of a kind.)

I'll say, you stay for the love of radishes the size of turnips, for chairs too big to sit on, for spoons that don't fit your mouth. I risked my life, I'll say. I say it, "I risked myself."

This is the beginning of everything that happens afterward. This and lightning, and hail, as it's falling now, big as walnuts. I look up straight into it. They've all run inside, even Wren, but I'm used to worse. I suppose they're afraid of ruining their hats. *Hats!* The meaning of the meaning of life, nor beauty either, has nothing to do with hats.

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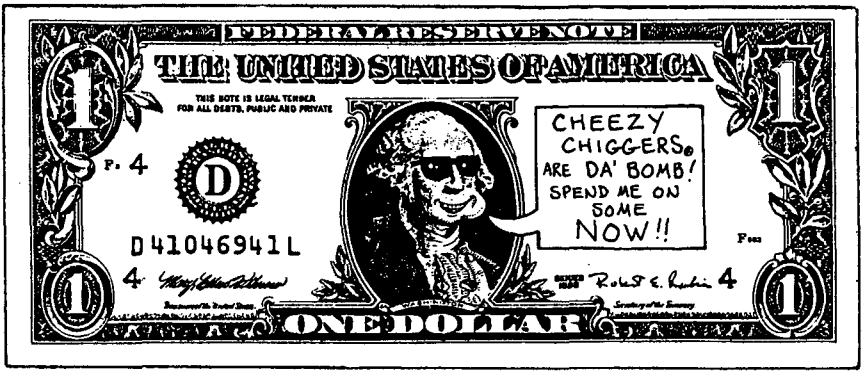
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Most readers of F&SF *need no introduction to Mr. Bisson, whose work routinely enlivens our pages. The author of such novels as* Voyage to the Red Planet, Talking Man, *and* Fire on the Mountain *is one of the finest craftsmen of short fiction at work today. His recent books include the novel* The Pickup Artist *and several e-books reviewed in Charles de Lint's column this month.*

His latest story appeared first (in slightly different form) in a Webzine entitled Gorp, *edited by Eileen Gunn. We gladly bring it to you now, even if it almost cost us an arm and a leg...*

A View from the Bridge

By Terry Bisson

GORP.COM INTERVIEW
with Liam E. Suzuki, Founder and CEO of Extreme Disasters Unltd.

Gorp.com: Gorp Online is here on the bridge of what is surely the most controversial ship in New York Harbor, hoping to have a few words with — Here he comes now!

Mr. Suzuki, surely you know that a lot of people disapprove of your company's practices and policies, and particularly this latest enterprise.

Suzuki: It's Captain Suzuki. But seriously, you can just call me Liam. And of course I know we're controversial. Extreme sports, adventure travel, risk-taking in general has always been controversial. Ever since the first primate tried to see how far he could crawl out on a limb before it broke. It's a love-hate thing with danger.

Gorp.com: But don't you think this is going a little too far?

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Suzuki: That's a familiar refrain, too. Look, extreme means extreme. The first BASE jumpers were considered crazy. Hell, maybe they were. That's what I liked about them, anyway.

Gorp.com: BASE jumping? Is that how you got started?

Suzuki: No, I worked up to it. I started back in high school in Orange County. We used to crash cars to set off the air bags. It sort of grew. We figured if you packed enough kids into a Volvo with front and side air bags nobody could get seriously hurt. We were wrong about that, but still, we had fun.

Gorp.com: No outdoor sports?

Suzuki: That came later. I got a bungee jump for a graduation present. I started sky diving after that. Did a little knife-edge snowboarding, avalanche racing, stuff like that. Then I met my wife Darlene — she turned me onto BASE jumping. We were part of the crowd that rollerbladed off Century Tower in downtown LA last New Year's.

Gorp.com: That one had a pretty grim casualty rate.

Suzuki: Well, it was midnight. And the drinking, you know. Which reminds me...(Here Suzuki made a quick cell phone call to make sure the champagne had been loaded onto the ship)...But we learned from that. We learned that a few fatalities could add to rather than detract from an event.

Gorp.com: So you went from Adventure to Disaster.

Suzuki: Not right away. It was a process. You might say it began when Darlene and I BASE jumped off a twenty-story housing project just as it was being brought down with explosive charges. That gave us the idea of staying in the building to see if we could survive.

Gorp.com: And you did. Survive, I mean.

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Suzuki: Pretty much. I lost these two fingers. Darlene lost a leg. We were in the news after that, and people started contacting us. It was a short step to taking groups, packaging the tour as an earthquake survival experience. We called it Rocking Richter. That led straight into the Towering Inferno.

Gorp.com: So it became a business.

Suzuki: We weren't incorporated yet, but yes, somebody had to handle the permits, the logistics. Darlene and I started hiring staff, mostly thrill hounds like ourselves. The Towering Inferno was an awesome money maker. We ran six in the first two years. Booked solid, months in advance.

Gorp.com: Thrill hounds, as you call them.

Suzuki: Not strictly. Corporations too. Corporate accounts were our bread and butter. AT&T, Microsoft. They used it for team building. I guess you learn a lot about your co-workers when you are trapped on the top floor of a burning building.

Gorp.com: If you make it.

Suzuki: Oh, you mostly make it. In fact, we guaranteed a casualty rate of not less than one or more than five, out of a group of twenty-five.

Gorp.com: So what made you decide to go historical?

Suzuki: It was Darlene's idea. She's sort of a history buff, loves famous disasters. We did the Shackleton trek (only we lost a couple) and then the *Medusa* disaster — the nineteenth-century French shipwreck thing. A hundred naked people adrift on a raft. No food, no water.

Gorp.com: That's when Extreme Disasters became controversial.

Suzuki: You're talking about the cannibalism. But you have to understand, controversy draws as many people as it repels. We don't do the

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Medusa anymore but we do a Donner Pass every winter. We have to turn people away. The *Medusa* was our only flop.

Gorp.com: What about the Hindenburg?

Suzuki: All right, that too. It's hard to get people on a disaster tour with NO survivors. But the Hindenburg did push us into aviation. As a matter of fact, our most popular event today is "Flight 13."

Gorp.com: How can you make that one affordable?

Suzuki: Well, for one thing, you don't need a new plane. We build in a failure but it's always different. Engine, hydraulics, cabin pressure, you name it. Sometimes it's ten minutes into the flight, sometimes an hour or so. The first year we used an off-lease DC-9. Now we use a 747 twice a year, and we're booked at 100 percent capacity.

Gorp.com: You don't have to be athletic for that one.

Suzuki: That's right! That's one key to its popularity. Plus since there's a survival rate of almost seventy percent, people can bring kids. It's great for bonding. Say the power goes out at 39000 — it can be a good ten-twelve minutes before you ditch. You can get real close to your wife, your kids, and yourself in that time. It's an unforgettable experience. Have you ever tried it?

Gorp.com: No. My fiancée tried the Amtrak Experience once.

Suzuki: How'd she do?

Gorp.com: Fine. A scar on her chin she likes to show off.

Suzuki: See! That's what we provide — bragging rights. A little excitement. Something for everybody — in this case a controlled derailment on a dirt embankment, with no fire. That keeps fatalities way down. In fact, they say it's safer than regular Amtrak. But that's a whole other story.

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Gorp.com: How about outdoor disasters? That's more our readers' speed.

Suzuki: They should check out our Andean Avalanche, or the Mexican Mudslide. Those are both very athletic. As a matter of fact, we lost Darlene in last fall's mudslide tour.

Gorp.com: Oh, I'm sorry.

Suzuki: Darlene died doing what she loved, which was trying to stay alive. We don't allow wheelchairs in that one anymore. So you learn from your mistakes.

Gorp.com: You mentioned kids. Does Extreme Disasters have anything for seniors?

Suzuki: You bet. We have two that come with AARP discounts — the Casino Bus Crash and the Nursing Home Fire. We're working out a deal with Elderhostel for an in-school shooting thing, sort of a geriatric Columbine. And of course we have lots of seniors aboard on this trip.

Gorp.com: What about this trip? I have several questions, beginning with the name.

Suzuki: The *Gigantic*? It's an approximation. We couldn't use the original. Too many permissions problems, what with the movie and all. But people know what it is. We were booked solid the first week we announced the cruise in the catalog.

Gorp.com: Is *Gigantic* a one-timer?

Suzuki: We hope to do it every year. We'll see how it goes. It's our most expensive event so far, but look what you get for your money: great food, fine wine, even ballroom dancing — ending in an unforgettable adventure which you have a pretty good chance of surviving.

Gorp.com: No steerage passengers? Without steerage, how can it be authentic?

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Suzuki: We're not about total authenticity. We're about bringing you the spirit of the thing. We only have 1800 passengers and crew, but the lifeboat-to-passenger ratio is exactly the same as the original. So it should be quite a scramble, those last few hours.

Gorp.com: Any idea how long it will take?

Suzuki: Four to six days tops. We'll steam north for three days, and then start looking for an iceberg. There's the ten-minute whistle right now.

Gorp.com: I'd better get ashore.

Suzuki: Care to join us? Always glad to have Gorp aboard. I'll comp you, as a crew member. You get a uniform and a little revolver — but no life jacket!

Gorp.com: It's tempting, but I have a thing about cold water, plus I have a deadline to make.

Suzuki: I can dig it. Maybe you'll be our guest in Honolulu in December for Pearl Harbor, our first international US/Japanese co-production. The water will be warmer for sure.

Gorp.com: You're very kind. I'll think about it. Meanwhile, good luck, Captain Suzuki.

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John Langan lives in upstate New York, where he is currently working on a Ph.D. at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His fiction has appeared previously in The Shawangunk Review *and* The Tinker. *His* F&SF *debut might make you think that his doctoral dissertation concerns Henry James or early twentieth-century ghost stories. It also might make you leave the lights on when you go to sleep.*

On Skua Island

By John Langan

I

THE STORY HAD HELD US, round the dinner table, sufficiently breathless, but except the obvious remark that it was weird, as, on a February night in an old house with a strong storm howling off the ocean, a story should essentially be, I remember no comment uttered till the eight of us adjourned to the living room with our drinks. There Fiona, my fiancée, noted it as the first time she had heard anyone number a tale that could be classified under the rubric of the zombie story among his own experiences. Whereupon Griffin, the story's narrator, hastened to repeat, for the third or possibly the fourth time, that much of the substance of what he had related was as it had been related to him on the beach by old Anthony, the fisherman, when everything was over, and although he, Griffin, indeed had seen what he was sure was DeBoer's white body through the green trees, the local doctor had been unable or unwilling to fix DeBoer's time of death with any certainty, so that the glimpse of him might have been a last look at a doomed, but still living, man.

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"But do you believe that?" Kappa, our hostess, asked Griffin, who shrugged and looked sheepishly at his port.

Jennifer, curled on one of the large wicker chairs, said, "You have to admit, most of the stories you hear in a setting like this — " she waved her hand for emphasis and, as if in response, the wind gusted to a shriek, rattling the windows and provoking a round of laughter from the rest of us. "Very nice," she said, "you see: I told you I had powers. You have to admit, the kind of story you tend to hear, which I guess means the kind of story people tend to know, is the ghost story. Isn't that true? Get my mother started, and she'll tell you about her Uncle Richard, who saw the woman next door two days after she died, when he was out behind the house chopping wood. She was floating three feet off the ground; his hair turned completely white on the spot."

"What happened to her?" Fiona asked.

"The woman? Who knows? She floated away. The point is, it's a ghost story." She turned to me. "Come on, Mr. Horror-story-writer, back me up on this."

"Ghost stories are popular," I said. "It does seem as if everyone knows one. Certainly you find more so-called serious writers trying their hands at ghost stories than you do stories about vampires, or mummies, or," with a nod to Griffin, who returned it, "zombies."

"I don't know," Fiona said. "I just spent the past semester teaching Henry James — a lot of Henry James — and let me tell you, there's a pretty fair amount of vampiric activity going on in old Henry's works, especially a book like *The Sacred Fount*."

"Granted," I said, "but he never wrote about mummies."

Bob, our host, said, "I wonder why that was," looking at Fiona, who answered, "It wasn't flexible enough: he couldn't adapt the idea of the mummy (mummyism?) to his type of story the way he could adapt the idea of the vampire, vampirism."

"Can anyone?" Jennifer asked. "I mean, how many big mummy novels have there been? It's not like the vampire: For a while there, it seemed like every other book, movie, and TV show was about vampires, for crying out loud."

"And frequently from the vampire's point of view," Bob added.

"I know, really, like I'm going to identify with this walking corpse

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who spends his nights sucking people's blood out of little holes in their necks. Hello! Whose brainstorm was this? Anyway, regardless of what I may have thought, they were very popular. And you've had God only knows how many of those zombie movies, those *Dead* movies, *Night of the Living Evil Dead from Hell Part III* or whatever, not to mention movies about the devil and possession and witches and toxic monsters — but we were talking about books, weren't we? Well, I'm sure you've had books about all those things, too, haven't you?" She looked at me.

"More or less," I said.

"And werewolves: This one," she gestured at me with her wineglass, "is working on a werewolf thing. It's very good. Are you done with it yet?"

"Not yet," I said.

"He's been very busy with the semester," Fiona said.

"We've got the great werewolf novel — sorry, I know I'm not supposed to call it that — we've got the great werewolf story coming, too, but what about the mummy?"

"The mummy is different," I replied. "It's a relic from a different time, the imperial age, from when the sun never set on the British Empire. Has anyone read any of the original mummy stories, the ones Arthur Conan Doyle wrote?" Only Bob nodded. "I shouldn't call them the original stories; I don't know for sure whether they are or not. I assume they were among the first. Anyway, Conan Doyle's mummy is very different from what we're accustomed to when we hear that name; at least, from what I think of. His mummy is a weapon. There's an obnoxious student of obscure foreign languages at Oxford who buys one that he keeps in his apartment for use against his enemies. He can read the spell that animates the mummy and sends it to do your bidding, which in his case usually involves disposing of the latest person who's annoyed him."

"Talk about revenge of the nerds," Jennifer said.

"What happens to him?" Fiona asked.

"Fortunately, a fellow student figures out what's going on and forces him to destroy the mummy, cut it up with dissecting knives and burn it together with the papers that brought it to life."

"How does he manage that?" Jennifer asked. "You would think the guy would just sic the mummy on him."

"He goes armed, with a gun."

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"Oh. I guess that would do the trick."

"Indeed. I haven't made any kind of exhaustive survey, but that seems to be how the mummy first enters English literature. I wonder if it doesn't express some kind of anxiety, or even guilt, about the whole imperial enterprise, particularly with regard to the museums. The mummy seems so much a creature of the museum, doesn't it? You imagine it shuffling through the museum after dark, one loose bandage trailing along the floor behind it. Where does that image come from? It must be a scene in a film, I suppose. But it's as if the mummy embodies a kind of doubt the British had about removing all those antiquities from their rightful locations and shipping them to London for display, as if they suspected the morality of their actions — "

"Or as if they were afraid of contamination," Fiona said.

"Mmm," Bob said. "Who knows what you're going to bring into the country?"

"Right, you have to be careful," I said. "That could be it, too, like *Dracula*. Watch out what you unload from the boats."

"*Dracula*?" Jennifer asked.

"There are those who see *Dracula* as sublimating a fear of rabies," Bob answered, "a fear of England becoming diseased through its contact with other, particularly very distant and very foreign, places."

"I see," Jennifer said. "Thank you, Bob. You're right about the mummy: We don't think about it in terms of the story you described. We think of it as a love story, am I right? It starts in ancient Egypt, with a priest who's in love with the wrong person: the Pharaoh's wife, or his sister — or weren't their sisters their wives? Anyway, he's in love with someone he's not supposed to be, so as a punishment for his *hubris* — see, I do remember something from Bob's class — he's mummified. Could you say he's mummified alive?"

"Well, technically, mummification was something that was done to you after you were dead," Bob said. "But hey — why not?"

"All right then: Bob has given me permission to use the phrase 'mummified alive.' So the priest is buried in the desert, where he's forgotten about for the next four to five thousand years, until a bunch of clueless archaeologists, or I guess they'd be Egyptologists, find him, bring him to the museum, and turn him loose."

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"Which usually involves his trying to find the reincarnation of his lost love," I added.

"Yes, who just happens to be the woman the hero's in love with, too. Convenient, that. The mummy kidnaps her and carries her to the Egypt room at the museum, which he has set up for the ceremony that will return his lost love's soul to the heroine's body. Luckily, the hero has figured all this out, and he shows up at the museum just in time to foil the mummy's plans. And get the girl. The mummy winds up incinerated."

"That's Hollywood," Fiona said, shaking her head, "everything becomes a romance."

"What's wrong with romance?" I asked, receiving in reply a sour expression. "Well," I said, "certainly the film versions of the mummy story tend to rob it of the deeper implications you find in the earlier written stories. The mummy becomes another monster, his Egyptian origins so much window-dressing."

Bob said, "The Egyptian associations had no resonance for Americans."

"Not the same resonance," Fiona said. "For America, Egypt was just another exotic location."

"So that's it?" Jennifer asked. "The mummy is dead? There's nothing anyone can do with it? Him? It?"

"This is all very nice," Kappa said, "and very educational, I can assure you. But isn't it a bit off track? We were talking about things that actually had happened to people, not movies and books."

Bob nodded, and Jennifer said, "You're absolutely right, Kappa, we were talking about actual events."

"So," I said, glancing round the company gathered there in the living room, my eyebrows raised for effect, "does anyone have a mummy story they'd care to share?"

There was a pause during which the wind fell off, and then a voice said, "I do."

We looked about to see who had spoken, and our eyes settled on Nicholas, who had been introduced at the commence of our stay at the Cape house as an old friend of Bob's from Harvard and who had maintained an almost unbroken silence in the five days since, departing the house for hours at a time on walks whose destination he shared with no one, but

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which appeared to take him inland, away from the beach and the winter-angry ocean. His face was buried under twin avalanches of white hair, one descending from the tangled mass crowning his head, the other rising from the tangled mass hugging his jaw, but his hooded eyes were a pale bright blue that I should have described as arctic. For dress, he favored a pair of worn jeans and a yellowed cable-knit sweater, which he supplemented with a long gray wool coat and boots that laced up just short of his knees for his jaunts outside. In reply to a question Jennifer had posed our first morning there, while Nicholas was out, Kappa had informed us that Nicholas was an archaeologist whose particular interest was the study of the Vikings, which was the basis upon which his friendship with Bob had been founded when they met at Harvard. Although they had maintained contact over the years, it was not uncommon for Nicholas to disappear on some expedition or another for months at a time, and occasionally longer, which was part of the reason Kappa assumed he had never married. He did not speak much: this we had witnessed ourselves as Jennifer, who prides herself on being able to have a conversation with any living human being, availed herself of every opportunity to ask Nicholas questions, about himself, his career, what he was engaged in currently, that he answered in monosyllables when possible, clipped phrases when not, his voice when he spoke the sandpapery rasp of one unaccustomed to frequent speech. Now he was sitting on a dining room chair he had positioned at the group's perimeter, between the dining room and the living room, a long-necked bottle of beer cradled in his hands. We shifted in our respective seats to face him, and he repeated, "I do; I have a mummy story."

"You do?" Bob asked.

"Well," Jennifer said, "I'm sure we'd all love to hear your story, Nicholas."

"Why don't you come a bit closer?" Kappa offered, but Nicholas made no effort to move.

"You have a mummy story?" Fiona asked, to which Nicholas nodded vigorously in reply.

"Yes," he said, "yes, I think you'd have to call it that."

Possessed by a sudden impulse, I asked, "Would you tell us your story, Nicholas?" which appeared to be the cue for which he had been waiting: He began to speak, his voice scraping like a machine that had been but

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seldom-used for an exceedingly long time. It strengthened, his voice, as he continued speaking; at the end of the hour and a half, or perhaps it was two hours, his story took, it sounded almost pleasant, the kind of voice that would have been at home delivering lectures to large groups of students at a university. The story he told would not have found a home at a university, however: it was the kind of story that is suited to a February night in an old house with a strong storm howling off the ocean. When his tale was completed, we retired to bed without much comment. I do not think any of us slept soundly that night; I know I did not. In the dark, I lay beside my fiancée listening to the wind moaning at our window, to the ocean smashing itself onto the beach, and when at last I slept I dreamed of a dark island, and gnarled hands reaching up, out of the water, to choke me.

II

THIS HAPPENED twenty-five years ago (Nicholas said). Immediately after, and for years, I thought the memory of it would never fade. I was sure the memory would never fade: It was burned into my brain. But the surface onto which it was burned has worn away over the last quarter-century, and now the memory doesn't seem as deeply engraved.

I was at the University of Aberdeen on a faculty exchange program. I was supposed to be delivering weekly lectures and meeting with students for tutorial sessions, but I was able to pass the bulk of those duties off on a bright young assistant someone at the University, probably the department chair, had decided to assign me. His name was Bruce; as I recall, he was from Greenock, a town on the west coast. Bruce delivered my lectures, which was to say he gave lectures he had researched and written and I told him I had read and approved, and Bruce took care of my tutorials. He was very eager. I was, too: I was using the free time Bruce allowed me to make trips all over the country to do research for a book I was writing on the Viking presence in Scotland, a subject I considered, and still do, vastly understudied. I would leave the University for anywhere from a day to a week at a time — well, I was away for a week only once, and that was to take part in a dig on Skye that an old friend of mine from undergrad was

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running. Nothing disastrous ever happened while I was gone, and I thought Bruce would benefit from all the experience.

When I returned from a trip, I spent a day organizing my notes, then another couple of days writing. I wrote from eight in the morning till four in the afternoon, stopping for a half-hour lunch sometime between eleven and one, depending on how the writing was proceeding. At four, I pushed my chair away from the typewriter and left my cold flat for a warm pub, usually one just down the street called The Tappit Hen. Most days, Bruce would join me to fill me in on how the latest lecture or tutorial had gone. I would nod at whatever he told me, not really listening to him, and say, "Sounds like you're doing fine." This pleased him what seemed to me an inordinate amount. I was flattered, yes, but I was also annoyed, maybe more annoyed than flattered. A number of significant discoveries concerning the Viking role in British history had broken in the last couple of years, and I had not been involved, not even remotely, in any of them. I had only been aware one of them was in progress. The picture of myself I saw in Bruce's broad freckled face reminded me acutely how far my reality was from his ideal.

Bruce was with me when the man from MI-5 pulled up a stool at the table. I assume he was from MI-5; I didn't ask and he didn't volunteer the information. He was affiliated with some type of intelligence operation, of that much I was sure. His skin was bad, his teeth were bad, and he wore his hair in a crewcut. He was carrying an old briefcase that he swung up onto the table and unsnapped, but did not open. He verified my identity, did not bother with Bruce's, and gave his name as Green. There were no handshakes. He had sought me out, Green said, because he thought I might be able to help him. He propped open his briefcase and withdrew from it a large envelope which he slid across the table to me, asking me to have a look at its contents and tell him what I thought.

The envelope held a dozen or so large black-and-white photographs. The first few were of an island, not a very large one from the look of it, a rocky beach and a couple of hills. There was a shape on top of one of the hills, the one to the right in the picture: what looked like a stone column. My guess was correct: The next photos showed a tall, narrow column that was covered from top to bottom in runes. A couple of the pictures were clear and close enough for me to have a good look at some of the runes, and

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when I did my heart started to knock in my chest. I had not seen runes like these before: There were certain family resemblances to runes I knew from parts of Eastern Norway, enough for me to be able to read a couple of words and phrases here and there, but there were also striking variations, and more than a few characters that were completely new, unprecedented. You may be surprised to hear that not once did I doubt these pictures' authenticity, but that was the case. I looked at Green and asked him where this was.

"So you're interested?" he asked. I said I was, and he told me that the island in these photographs was located north-northwest of the Shetlands, an hour and a half's boat ride from the nearest human habitation. The place was called Skua Island, and if I thought that artifact of any archaeological significance, he and his employers — his term — were prepared to send me there to study it within two weeks, as soon as school let out for Christmas holiday.

Of course I was suspicious. People don't just approach you in a pub and offer to pay your way to unearthing a potentially historic find. Did I say unearthing? Yes: That was what one of the segments of writing I could read said, that there was something buried underneath this column, something I immediately thought might be the remains of a nobleman or hero. Even if what lay below the column wasn't that exciting, the column itself was: Among the runes were characters that I thought I recognized as ancient Greek, and a couple that resembled pictographs I had seen on scrolls on display at the Met, in New York, in the Egyptian wing. I saw myself invited to lecture at Oxford, at the Sorbonne, on my earth-shaking discovery. And if that discovery had been arranged and financed by an intelligence organization, what difference did that make? I had heard of such partnerships in the past; it was impossible to go very far in the field in any direction without encountering them: A team was provided generous funding to go to Peru, or Morocco, or Indonesia, and in exchange all they had to do was answer a few questions on their return, plot out the route they had taken through the mountains on a map, share their photographs of the capital, the airport. It's been the way of the archaeological world since at least the Victorians, probably longer. Undoubtedly, I was needed on the island as a cover, a front for whatever operation required its use. Perhaps they wanted to monitor the movements of Soviet

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submarines in the North Atlantic. If we could help each other, I saw no harm in it.

So I agreed, and even engaged to have Bruce accompany me as a reward for his slave labor. The morning after the last day of classes, the two of us were flown in a small plane from Aberdeen to the Shetlands, where we were introduced to the rest of our crew, eleven men whose posture and crewcuts bespoke their military associations as well as any uniform would have. I don't remember most of their names, only the leader's, Collins, whom I later heard the men address as "Major," and another, Joseph — I'm not sure if that was his first or last name — and a third, Ryan. Collins was older, by ten years at least, than his men, in his early to mid-thirties. He was short and stocky, and his eyes were green and sharp. All the gear I had requested he had procured and had stored on board the fishing ship that had been hired to ferry us to the island. One thing I will say for the military: They are efficient. We ate lunch on the ship as it rode out of port.

By then it was one o'clock, and already the sky was darkening. I don't know if any of you have been that far north in the winter (Bob, I know you've been to Iceland, but wasn't that in the summer?), but the sun only puts in an appearance for a few hours a day, fewer the closer to the Arctic Circle you venture. It goes without saying that the sea was rough. Rough! It was a heap of gray slabs heaving around us. Despite the pills we had swallowed with our lunches, Bruce and I were soon hanging over the ship's side, our lunches offerings to the sea. None of our companions seemed much affected. I remember that trip as a succession of flights and drops, the deck seesawing beneath our feet, the ship's engine throbbing as it scaled one gray hill then slid down another, the waves striking the bow with a great hollow boom. We made better time than the season should have allowed, and it was just over an hour after we left port that Skua Island rose to our left. Ryan pointed it out to me, but my eyes already had found it. It wasn't more than a couple of hills that seemed barely taller than the waves swelling around us. Even given the hour and the failing light, the place seemed unusually dark. I searched the hill crests and located the column on the hill to the left, which meant that the photograph Green had shown me had been shot from the other side of the island. It was to there that we made our way. Seen from above, the island

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resembled a horseshoe, the opening facing north and forming a bay that was only a little less choppy than the sea. The ship dropped anchor in the bay, and Bruce and I and the eleven soldiers packed our gear into bright yellow inflatable rafts that we rowed to shore. As we approached the beach, a great cloud of black-backed gulls, really, a surprising number for so small an island, rose into the wind, shrieking furiously. It's an enormous bird, the black-backed gull; as we pulled up on the beach, the flock hung there overhead screaming at us for what seemed a long time, before veering away.

The ship waited for us to land, then raised anchor and headed for home. In a week, it would be back to collect us. I had wanted longer, two weeks minimum with the possibility of a third should the need arise, but seven days was the best offer Green claimed to be empowered to make. So once we had carried our rafts across the beach, up and over a rise, up to the relative shelter of one of the hills, while Bruce and the men struck camp, I dug a flashlight out from a bag and set off for the column. I wanted to see it. The ground was soft, spongy: peat bog, covered with moss. The hill wasn't especially steep, but there was what felt like a hurricane strength arctic wind blowing against me as I climbed, and by the time I reached the summit, such as it was, and the column, my face felt as if it had been peeled off.

The column was as tall as I was, a foot or so wide, struck from what appeared to be gray granite. I traced the flashlight beam up and down it, over the tightly bunched runes descending from its rounded top to a point beneath the ground's surface. I circled it, slowly, not caring that my face was not even numb anymore, thinking about the men who had raised and carved it, about whatever they had buried underneath it. I knew little of them: I could venture a few educated guesses but I would remain largely in the dark until I had deciphered these runes and seen what the column covered; even then, there would be much I would not know. But standing there in front of their handiwork, the stars already glittering in the sky, I felt close to those strange men to an extent I had not experienced before, so much so that I would not have been surprised to have turned around and found one of them standing behind me, wrapped in a great fur cape. The secrets I was poised to uncover filled my head, as did the lectures waiting for me to deliver them at Cambridge, Berkeley. The wind was finally too

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much for such revelry, however, so I quickly made my way back down to camp.

As I did, I thought of my father. I don't know if I ever told you about him, Bob; I don't think so. He had owned a hardware store in Ann Arbor when I was a child. Never terribly successful, he had slid into bankruptcy not too long after my mother died, my first year at Harvard. He had held a series of low-paying, low-skills jobs over the next couple of years, then wandered in front of the minister's Chrysler one unlucky Saturday afternoon. He had lingered in the hospital long enough for me to make the trip out to Michigan to sit by his bedside as he died. My older sister — her husband, actually — had to pay for the funeral and the tombstone. At some point in the next two days of standing around the funeral home, shaking the hands of people I hadn't seen in ten years or didn't remember, I had promised myself, pledged myself, that my life was not going to follow the same trajectory as his. I was not going to struggle at society's margins until the designated car arrived to strike me down. At other people's funerals, especially the funerals of those who are close to us, it's natural to think of our own funerals, our deaths, and I vowed that mine would be different from this drab, sparsely attended affair with which my father was sent to his eternal reward. When I died, people would sit up and take notice at my passing. I would be remembered. Sliding into my sleeping bag that first night on the island, on the brink of discovery, I thought I was at last on my way to realizing that pledge.

We were up and at the site early the next morning, while it still was dark. The wind had abated from the night before, but only somewhat; we stood with our backs to it as much as we could. Green had told me I could have seven men at my disposal, and seven men I had. I didn't see where the others went, nor did I care. I had decided to push ahead and excavate the column and whatever lay beneath it, a move I described to myself as bold but that was really premature if not foolish before I had deciphered the runes. But it was a move I felt Green's time constraints compelled me to. The men worked swiftly and well, including Collins, mostly under Bruce's supervision, as I copied down the column's inscriptions into a notebook that I pored over in our tent later that night, surrounded by all the dictionaries of ancient languages I owned or had been able to procure in the time before our trip. The first order of business was to remove the

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column, which the men accomplished with what seemed remarkable ease within a day and a half. Among their other skills, they appeared to have had some training as engineers; perhaps that was why they had been selected for this trip. Perhaps it was part of the reason, anyway. The column descended another two feet into the ground; when it was out and lying on a blue tarpaulin, I spent the end of that afternoon and the beginning of the following morning inspecting the cavity that had held it before giving the go-ahead to start digging. Within five minutes of that command, none other than Bruce himself made our first discovery.

It was a sword, wrapped in the remnants of a cloth that melted when the air struck it. It was unlike any Viking weapon with which I was familiar, and I knew them all. Its rusted blade was easily a yard long. The hilt had been struck in the shape of a bird, its opened beak holding the blade, its outspread wings forming the exaggeratedly wide guard, its body the grip, and its talons the pommel. Through the peat clotted around the pommel, I saw bright green: Scraping it clean with my fingers revealed an enormous emerald clutched in the bird's claws. The style of the metalwork was completely foreign to me, as was the bird it was supposed to represent. It was no bird of prey, which is what you would expect for a sword. Joseph recognized it, however; it was a bonxie, a skua, the seagull-like bird from which this island had taken its name. Dreadful fierce birds, he said, especially when they were nesting. They would fly straight for you if you wandered in among their nests, peck your eyes out.

You can imagine my excitement, which, to be fair, seemed to be shared by all the men, and not just Bruce. Each of them wanted to see the sword, to hold it. Here was history come up from out of the ground, and they had been present for it. Although the sky was clouding over with the advance forces of a storm that had been approaching steadily from the south since sunrise, we continued the dig. Down a foot and a half from our first find, our second took almost another hour to come to light; once again, it was Bruce whose shovel uncovered it. His work had revealed part of a human body, a shoulder, the skin dark, shrunken, and leathery from having been held for who knew how long in the peat bog. The rest of us converged on Bruce's find, and I began directing the excavation. In a short time, the shoulder was revealed to be connected to an arm and a torso, and that torso to a head and another arm and to two legs. We did our best not

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to handle the body, clearing out space on either side of it so that we could stoop to examine it. By now, the sky was completely dark, and our flashlights out and on. The rain was spattering, and threatening to do worse imminently. The men shining their flashlights down into the hole, I knelt to see what we had, Bruce to my left.

It was a woman, her skin dark oak in color and pulled tight around her bones by the relentless action of the bog. Her throat had been cut, that was the first thing I noticed; you could see the ragged space where a knife had been dragged across it. Neither very tall nor very big, she was wearing a short, plain, coarsely woven tunic. Her arms were bound together behind her back, and her feet were bound as well, both with leather straps that had worn well. Her face — there was something wrong with her face; even allowing for the effects of the peat bog on it, her face appeared to have been disfigured, particularly around the cheeks and eyes, where dull bone shone through, as if she had been struck by a knife, or a club or axe. Her nose was largely gone, apparently torn off. Her jaws were slightly parted; her eyesockets filled with brackish water, her braided hair woven with peat fibers.

Years after this, Bob, you sent me a collection of Seamus Heaney's poems, *North*. Your inscription said that I would enjoy the poems because Heaney, too, was doing archaeology. I didn't know he had written about the Irish bog mummies, so until I read the book, which wasn't for months, I resented what I thought was a too-glib comparison on your part. Once I opened the collection, however, and started reading, I found I couldn't stop. I read and re-read those poems. There was one in particular I kept returning to, called "Strange Fruit"; I read it until I had memorized it, and then I mumbled the words in my sleep. It was a description of a girl's decapitated head, which it compared to "an exhumed gourd." Heaney wrote of the head's "leathery beauty," its "eyeholes black as pools," and his words returned me to that hole in the peat, to that woman's body lying slightly curled, seven flashlight beams wavering on it. I wasn't sure what she was doing there: She might have been a sacrifice sent to accompany an important personage on his journey into the afterlife, but in that case she should have been both better dressed and closer to the man she was to join. Her garb, her bound hands and feet, the damage to her face, strongly hinted that she had been executed, punished for one crime or

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another, possibly adultery, possibly witchcraft, possibly murder. Yet if that was the case, then why had she been buried under this monument and strange sword? You wouldn't mark a criminal's grave in such a way.

Before we could investigate any further, the hole we had dug and cleared began to fill with water. It welled up quickly; from where I was crouched, I could have sworn it started from the gash in the woman's neck, pouring out of it in a thick stream. Bruce and I scrambled to escape the hole, the soldiers catching our arms and hauling us up and out. In a matter of seconds, our find was submerged in water so brackish our flashlights could distinguish nothing beneath its swirling surface. At almost the same moment, the clouds assembled overhead unleashed a deluge so fierce it left very little beyond Bruce, who was standing next to me, visible. There was no recourse: We would have to retreat to camp and wait till tomorrow to continue our work. At least, I reflected as we trudged down the hill, heads down against the rain, the water would preserve the body for us.

That night, I worked at further decoding the column's text, but found it difficult not to become distracted speculating on the sword lying on a towel beside my sleeping bag, or the woman lying underwater at the top of the hill. Bruce and I spent quite a bit longer than we should have trading suppositions, imagining explanations, and when I closed my notebook and sank down to sleep, I had accomplished much less than I had intended. With the possibility of more awaiting our discovery, however, I was less distressed over my lack of progress than I otherwise might have been. As long as the site continued to yield results, the translation could wait; if it came to that, there was no reason for me not to work on it when I returned to Aberdeen. It was a history, dating from when I was not sure, but guesstimated some time before the first millennium. It recounted a terrible plague that had afflicted the communities of all the islands, a geographic vagary that seemed to encompass at least the Shetlands, the Orkneys, the Outer Hebrides, and possibly the Inner Hebrides and parts of mainland Scotland itself. This plague was no mere ordinary sickness, but had especially malevolent associations: It had either escaped or been set loose or been sent from a place deep under Middle Earth, a place connected to a god or person, perhaps a sorcerer, with whom I was unfamiliar, but who was or was associated with the worm. His name was represented by

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a pictograph of a circle broken at about two o'clock, for which I could find no reference, however tentative. The plague's effects were reported as horrible, but left unspecified.

The next morning, the rain had passed and everything changed. Bruce shook me awake to tell me that something terrible had occurred during the night and the storm, and Collins wanted to see me. In reply to my questions, he answered that he didn't know what was the matter, but the Major seemed agitated, quite agitated. I dressed hurriedly, and found Collins standing beyond our cluster of tents, on the other side of the rise separating us from the beach, beside a pair of blue tarpaulins like the one on which we had laid the column two days before. The tarps had been weighted down at their corners with large rocks to prevent them from fluttering away from the shapes they stretched over. There were a pair of large brownish birds standing beyond the tarps that I thought I recognized as skuas. Greeting Collins, I asked him what the problem was. "There are two of my men under there," he said, jerking his thumb at the tarps. "They're dead." He made no move to pull back the tarps, nor did I request him to.

I was shocked, and said so. Aside from the fact that both men's necks had been broken, their heads wrenched almost backward, and their eyes gouged out (although that was probably the birds, the skuas, which had found the bodies before he did), Collins didn't know what had happened. He assumed that the aggressor, his word, had ambushed the first man while he had been standing guard, then waited by his body for the second man to come to relieve him. He himself had not heard a thing, although given the storm blowing that would have been more difficult. Of course I hadn't heard anything, and told him so, which didn't seem to surprise him. Who could have done this? I asked him, and despite his reply that he hadn't the faintest idea, something in his answer, the way he gave it as if it were a scripted line he had been forced to deliver without having had sufficient time to rehearse it, made me think that he had a very good idea who was behind this. Perhaps the specifics were a little dim, but I realized that he thought we had been discovered, or I should say that he had been discovered, he and his men, by whomever they had come up here to observe. If that were the case, then whoever had assassinated these two men was most likely still on the island, waiting for night's early fall to finish his — or their — work. When Collins told me that he was going to

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have to ask me to remain by my tent for a little while this morning, until his men had had a chance to scour the island, I did not protest but said of course, I understood. If this man and his orders were all that was going to be standing between me and a team of Soviet commandoes, I thought it wisest not to antagonize him.

Thus, I was back at my translation much sooner than I had anticipated, while Collins sent out two two-man patrols to sweep the island, one heading east, the other west, from our camp to meet on the opposite side of the island, where they would advance together to sweep the hills before returing to camp. Throughout, they would maintain radio silence. Collins, the men, were not dressed any differently than they had been the day before; they had not changed into camouflage and berets at the first sign of trouble; but there was something different about them, and it was only after I had been seeing the hands held in the large jacket pockets, or inside the jackets to one side or the other, that I realized they were all armed, with pistols and submachine guns, and were keeping those arms close at hand, ready for use. They were more tense, but I could hardly fault them for that: I was more tense.

Bruce kept with the men, watching for the patrols' return, while I did my best to apply myself to the column's strange characters. When the patrols were not back within a couple of hours, I was not worried: Even islands as small as this one could contain hidden caves, gullies, chasms, that might lengthen a search of it considerably. When the patrols had not shown by lunch, Bruce was noticeably anxious; I told him to relax, it might be hours yet. The translation was no less difficult, but I began to find the rhythm of it, so that even though large patches of it remained unclear, the broad outlines were beginning to swim into view. During this terrible plague, the peoples of the islands had sought high and low, near and far, for relief and found none. There was a considerable list of all the important people who had gone to their graves with the thing, denied the glory of a warrior's death in battle through the machinations of the one who had unleashed it. At last, the leaders of — I thought it was the Shetlands, but it could have been the Orkneys — had decided to seek the aid of a wizard whose name I couldn't quite fix; the characters appeared to be Greek but weren't yielding any intelligible sound; who lived in the Faroe islands and who was something of a dubious character, having

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dealings with all sorts of creatures, human, divine, and in-between, to whom it was best to give a wide berth. Driven by their desperation, the leaders dispatched an envoy imploring his aid. Twice he refused them, but on the third request his heart softened and he agreed to assist them. He journeyed to the islands on a boat that did not touch the water, or that moved as swiftly as a bird across the water, and when he arrived he wasted no time: Disclosing the supernatural origin of the plague, he told the leaders that strong measures would be needed to defeat it. He, the wizard, could summon all the sickness to himself, but he could not purge it from the Earth. In order for that to be accomplished, he would require a vessel, by which, as the leaders quickly saw, he meant a human being.

By now, the sun had set, and neither patrol had appeared. I was uneasy; Bruce appeared to be barely containing a full-fledged panic attack: He ducked in and out of the tent half a dozen times in fifteen minutes, until I closed my notebook and went with him to join Collins and the others. Collins and two of the men, Joseph and Ryan, were crouched outside his tent; I presumed the other two were standing guard somewhere off in the gathering darkness. The weapons were out and on display now: Each man carried a black submachine gun slung over his shoulder. They were engaged in a quiet conversation that ceased as I drew near. Squatting beside them, I asked if there had been any sign of either patrol, and was not surprised when Collins shook his head from side to side. Were we going to continue to wait for them? As of now, that was our plan. Should we perhaps think about radioing for reinforcements, that kind of thing? Collins fixed me with his sharp green eyes. "Reinforcements?" he repeated. "Why, Doctor, you make it sound as if this were some kind of military operation. My men and I are out here to assist you in your excavation and analysis of objects of priceless value to our national heritage."

"Then why those?" I asked, pointing to the guns.

"No harm in being prudent," Collins replied.

"Ah, yes, prudent," I said. Well, if we weren't going to call for reinforcements, since, I hastened to add, we were only an archaeological expedition and, as he had said, what possible need could archaeologists have for reinforcements? perhaps we could shorten the length of our expedition?

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That was a decision Collins would leave for the morning.

In that case, I said, would he be so kind as to provide Bruce and me with samples of the prudence — I gestured at the guns — he and his men had seen fit to exercise? Things being what they were, it seemed prudent for all of us to be prudent.

He did not think that was prudent, Collins said immediately. If Bruce and I were discovered, he did not say by whom, with any kind of weapon it would go much worse for us than if we were unarmed.

"You forget," I said, "I have the sword."

Collins laughed, and said if any Vikings landed on the beach he would call on me to lead the charge against them. In the meantime, he would post Ryan outside our tent, to ease our minds. Never let it be said that the British did not value their scholars, even if those scholars were American.

And then a sudden smell flooded my nostrils, a thick stench full of bog rot and rancid flesh. I coughed, fighting down the bile rushing up my throat, and Collins, Joseph, and Ryan gagged. I opened my mouth to ask what it was, and for a second the smell was in my mouth, a vile taste coating my teeth, my tongue, my throat. I thought I was going to vomit, and then, as quickly as it came, the smell was gone. I breathed deeply, and looked at Collins. I could not think what to say, and neither, apparently, could he. We stared at each other for what felt like minutes. "Well," I said at length, "I guess I'll turn in."

"Good," he said. "Do that."

I left Collins with a request that should the patrols return I would be notified, regardless of the hour, to which he agreed. Neither my work nor my sleep were interrupted that night. Sitting cross-legged in my tent, the notebook open on my lap, reaching for this dictionary, then that dictionary, moving ahead a line only to have to move back two to reconsider the way I had rendered this word, or that, making brilliant leaps and worse than obvious blunders, I tried not to think about whoever was waiting out there in the dark, whoever had seized those men's heads in his hands and twisted, swift and hard, so that their necks had snapped audibly and they had fallen down dead, their eyes food for the skuas. I tried not to wonder what he or they had done to the patrols, whether they were lying scattered over the island with their heads wrenched almost backward, their arms and legs splayed; or had they been knifed? gloved hands clamped over their

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mouths, the blade drawn across their throats in a single burning stroke; or shot? a bullet spat out of a silencer into an eye, an ear. I tried not to think about any of these deaths being visited on me. I tried to decode more about the island leaders' response to the wizard's demand for a human being to serve as vessel to contain the plague. It appeared they had consented to his request with minimal debate: One man, Gunnar, a landowner of some repute, had refused to have anything to do with such dealings, but that same night the plague fell on him and by morning he was dead; his brains, the history detailed, burst and ran out his ears. After Gunnar, no one else contested the leaders' decision, and Frigga, Gunnar's eldest daughter, was selected by the leaders for the wizard's use. Elaborate preparations were made, several lengthy prayers were addressed to various gods, Odin, Loki, and Hel, goddess of death, among them, and then the wizard called all of the plague to himself, from all the islands he summoned it. It came as, or as if, a cloud of insects so vast it filled the sky, blotting out the sun. Men and women covered their heads in fear; an old woman fell dead from terror of it. The wizard commanded the plague into Frigga, who was lying bound at his feet. At first, it did not obey, nor did it heed the wizard's second command, but on his third attempt his power proved greater and the plague descended into Frigga, streaming into her mouth, her nose, her ears, the huge black cloud lodging itself within her, until the sky was once again clear, the sun shining.

This, however, was not the end. Frigga remained alive; she had become as fierce as an animal, straining against her bonds, gnashing her teeth and growling at the wizard and at the islands' leaders, threatening bloody vengeance. Nonplussed, the wizard had her rowed to the island of the — to Skua Island, where she was put ashore, her feet loosed but her hands still bound. The island was full of the skuas; there to nest, I supposed; and when Frigga, or what had been Frigga, set foot among them, they flew at her fiercely, attacking her unprotected face and eyes with no mercy. Her screams were terrible, heard by all the peoples of all the islands. At last, the birds left her with no face and no eyes, which the wizard said was necessary so that she should go unrecognized among the dead, so that she should be unable to find her way out of the place to which he was going to dispatch her. Half a dozen strong men seized her, for even so injured she was fearfully powerful, and bore her up to the summit of one of the island's

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hills, where the wizard once more bound her feet and slew her by cutting her throat. The blood that spilled out was black, and one of the men it splashed died on the spot. When all the blood had left her, the wizard ordered her body buried at the summit of the opposite hill, and a stone placed over it as a reminder to all the people of all the islands of what he (once more that name I couldn't decipher) had done for them, and as a warning not to disturb this spot, for now that the girl's body had been used as a vessel for returning (that symbol, the broken circle) evil to him, it would be a simple matter for him to return Frigga to her body full of his power, and if he did, she would be awful. He, the wizard, would place a sword between the stone and the girl that would keep her in her place, and he would write the warning on the stone himself, so that all could read it. Woe be to he who disturbed the sword: Not only would the wrath of the one who had sent the plague fall on him, but the wrath of the wizard as well, and he would lose to the reborn girl that which she herself had lost, by which I assumed was meant his face.

It was late when I completed the preliminary translation; Bruce had long since retired to sleep. You might think I would have experienced some trepidation, some anxiety, over what I had brought to light, but you would be mistaken. Despite the hour, I was exhilarated: In a matter of days, I had rendered into reasonably intelligible English a text written in a language whose idiosyncracies would have cost many another scholar weeks if not months of effort to overcome. Yes, there was a curse, a pair of curses, threatened against whoever disturbed the site, but such curses were commonplace; indeed, I would have been more surprised had there been no curse, no warning of dire consequences. Melodramatic films aside, when all was said and done, King Tut's curse had been nothing more than a self-fulfilling prophecy. If I was worried about anything, it was the team of Soviet commandoes creeping ever closer to us, knives clenched between their teeth, waiting for the precise moment to take revenge on us for whatever operations Collins and his men had been performing. The text on the column I judged an elaborately coded narrative, possibly intended to justify an actual event, the killing of the girl we had discovered, through recourse to supernatural explanations.

I was not particularly moved by the story I had translated. I don't think it will surprise you to hear that; you're academics: You understand

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the idea of professional distance. You might be interested to learn the number of people unable to maintain a similar distance. I have encountered them in my classrooms, generally in my introductory courses, and at the public lectures I have delivered, usually at the request of a museum. Perhaps you have dealt with them, too. These people find the notion of the kind of thing that happened to Frigga having occurred in their country unduly upsetting. That such actions are performed in other places, by other people, they readily accept; as long as it's foreigners, they are not troubled. Suggest, however, that, as it were, someone's hundred-times-great-grandfather was a participant at a human sacrifice, and it's an affront, as if you had accused the person her or himself of having held the knife and made the cut. Some try to suggest that the people who performed these acts were foreigners; in this case, Vikings as opposed to true Scots; until I remind them that those foreigners are their ancestors, that the Vikings became Scots. By the time Frigga was slain, the two cultures were already fairly integrated. I imagine it's shame that's at the root of the sometimes surprisingly intense denials I have met with. There is no need for it: There is no culture that is innocent. In most cases, you don't have to dig particularly long or hard to unearth similar events. We are never as far from such things as we would like to think.

I unzipped the tent's flap and stepped out into the night air to stretch legs long past cramped and unbend a back in danger of remaining permanently crooked. To my relief, Ryan was still on watch. There had been, he informed me, still no sign of either patrol; come morning, he thought the Major was going to call for someone to come fetch us. He, Ryan, was sorry that I would have to abandon the dig, which I assured him he needn't be. Even the little we had accomplished was something, and there was always the possibility of returning at a later date, during the summer, maybe, when it was warmer, and light for most of the day. If he wanted to join us, I said, I would be happy to hold a place for him. He thanked me but thought he had best decline, since come summer there was a good chance he would be quite a distance from here. And good riddance at that, he added. I laughed and said I completely understood. Stretching myself a final time, I told Ryan I would see him in the morning.

"Let's hope so, sir," he said.

Before I fell asleep, I thought again about my father, about his death.

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I remembered the suit we had buried him in, a cheap, worn and faded brown polyester suit that was at least ten years out of fashion; I remembered the tie we had given the funeral home for him, a red, white, and blue adaptation of the stars and stripes I had given him when I was twelve for Father's Day and that he had continued to claim was his favorite tie; I remembered the small group of mourners at the funeral service, barely sufficient to fill the first three pews of the church. At the time, I had found all of it maddeningly pathetic; now I thought that at least my father had had a funeral. It seemed likely I was going to die out here alone and who knew what was going to be done with my body? Stripped and set out for the birds, perhaps, or my pockets stuffed with rocks and submerged, an unexpected bounty for the crabs and fish. At least there was a place with my father's name on it and the dates of his birth and death, a place to which you could drive on a Sunday with your children, as my sister sometimes did. My monument would be an island few knew and even fewer had visited.

I slept unexpectedly late, waking with the sunrise. I suppose I expected the morning to bring, if not my own death, or Bruce's, news of the deaths of others, of one or several or even all of the men during the night. That was not the case: Although the four men who had left camp yesterday morning had not yet returned, and did not seem likely to, the seven of us had survived, and the chill, bright air was warm with the relief bubbling up out of us. Overhead, a skua cried out, and I took the sound for a good omen. Collins was no less relieved than the rest of us, but had decided to take no chances, radioing for the boat to return for us. We had two hours, and then we would be leaving Skua Island. No one, least of all me, was upset by this. Maybe, I thought as I hurried to my tent and stuffed my notebook, pen, and assorted dictionaries into my duffel bag, the Soviets had not intended to liquidate the lot of us, only enough to disrupt the mission, cause Collins to pull up stakes and leave sooner than he had intended to; if that was the case, they had succeeded. Or maybe one or both of the patrols had managed to wound their assailants mortally even as they themselves were killed. A day raid was not impossible, but unlikely: obviously, whatever force had been deployed on the island was too small to storm the camp, or it would have done so already, and attacking during daylight would not improve its chances in a firefight. It did occur to me that the Soviets might be waiting for all of us to board the ship to torpedo

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it, but I thought that scenario unlikely: To destroy a civilian vessel in its territorial waters was to risk consequences far in excess of whatever small benefit or satisfaction our deaths might bring. Having come through the night, I felt strangely invincible, the way, I imagine, one of Beowulf's men must have felt after having lived through that awful night in Hêorot.

Fueled by that sensation of invincibility, I decided I must return to the hilltop to take photographs of the column and the mummy. I had copied down the runes but I had no evidence of the object they had covered, as I had no evidence of what that object had covered. All I had was the sword, which, while intriguing, required the column and the mummy to establish its full significance. The risk of this past day, I thought, the lying in my tent waiting to die, would have been for nothing, if I couldn't bring back sufficient proof of the island's archaeological significance to ensure funding to mount a return come summer. Of course it was irrational, contradictory, but in a remarkably short space of time — the time it took to shove two pairs of socks and an extra pair of jeans into a duffelbag — I had convinced myself that if we had survived the night then we were free and clear of danger, and if we were free and clear of danger, then there was no reason not to go to the site. When I broached the subject to him, Bruce was game for running up the hill, snapping a dozen quick photographs, and running back down; as for Collins, he said that while he advised against our leaving the camp, he would not stop us from doing so. He also would not give us any of his men to accompany us, and he would not hold the ship for us if we were not back when it sailed into the bay. He appeared neither surprised nor concerned; his mind, I assume, occupied by other things. I thanked him and returned to the tent, which Bruce, ever-efficient, was in the process of flattening and rolling up. I was searching through my bag when Ryan walked up beside me and, before I realized what he was doing, slid an automatic pistol into the right pocket of my coat. "If anything happens," he said, smiling as if he were sharing a joke or a pleasant observation, "you switch off the safety, hold it in one hand and steady with the other, and line up the front sights with the back. It's got quite a kick to it, so be ready. If me and the lads hear anything, we'll try to do what we can." I nodded, and he strolled away to join the rest of his colleagues as they continued packing up the camp and loading it into the yellow inflatable rafts.

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Bruce and I made the top of the hill without incident. There were a trio of skuas roosting on the column, but they flapped off as we approached. The hole was still full of black water, I saw, but once more thought it would be good for preserving our find. Bruce snapped pictures of the column lying on its blue tarp while I eased myself down into the pool beneath whose surface our mummy, our Frigga, as I had started to think of her, lay. We would raise her, which I thought could be accomplished with minimal damage, set her on the ground, photograph her, and return her to the water. The water was almost to the tops of my boots, but only almost, for which I was grateful. Balancing on my left foot, I brought the right forward, feeling for the body. I touched nothing. Apparently, she was further away from this side of the hole than I had remembered. I advanced a step, repeated the procedure, and again felt nothing. Confused, I tried a third time, and a fourth, and then I was at the other side of the hole. I turned around and ran through the process again, with no more success. The hole was empty: Someone had removed Frigga. I looked up at Bruce to speak, but was stopped by a sound: the popping of firecrackers, gunfire, and brief, high cries that sounded like those of birds but were not. His face paled, and I felt the blood drain from mine. Struggling up the side of the hole, I felt in my coat pocket for the pistol and, my fingers closing around it, withdrew it as Bruce caught the top of my coat and helped me the rest of the way up. The sight of the gun startled him; he had not seen Ryan slip it to me nor had I told him. For another five, maybe ten, seconds, the distant gunfire continued, two or three submachine guns stuttering at the same time, and the cries, too, before all of it ceased. It did not start again.

Although, for reasons more of irrational panic than any real knowledge, I did not believe what I said, I told Bruce that undoubtedly we had heard Collins and the men dealing with whoever had been plaguing us. All the same, there was no harm in being careful: Thus, attempting to conceal ourselves behind the scant cover afforded by slight rises of ground and solitary boulders, we descended the hill back to camp, myself in the lead with the pistol held out in front of me, Bruce following. I was filled with an almost overwhelming sense of dread, an emotion that partook equally of hanging over the toilet knowing you were going to vomit and in so doing plunge yourself into stomach-twisting illness, and of watching your father's chest sink for the final time, standing on the brink of a plunge of

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a very different, but no less real, kind. The camp was quiet as we sighted it, and as we drew nearer, I saw why: Everyone was dead, Collins, Ryan, Joseph, the two others. Ryan was collapsed on a yellow raft, and I could not understand what was wrong with his body until I realized that his head was turned around backward, his eye-sockets empty and bloody, blood trailing from his nose, his open mouth. Collins was on the ground next to him, facedown in a wide pool of blood still spreading from where his left arm had been torn from his body and tossed aside, where it lay with a pistol still clenched in hand. I did my best not to look directly at either of them, because I was afraid that if I did I would join Bruce, who was sobbing behind me. The remaining three men lay with one of the other rafts: A glance that lasted too long showed me another of them with his neck broken, one, I think it was Joseph, with both his arms torn off, the third with a gaping red hole punched into his chest. All their eyes appeared to have been gouged out. There was blood everywhere, flecks, streaks, puddles of red splashed across the scene. From where we were standing on the hill, I could see over the rise beyond the camp to the bay and sea, both of which were empty.

"What happened?" Bruce said. "What happened to them?"

I told him I didn't know and I didn't: No team of Soviet commandoes, however brutal, however ruthless, would have done this. Overhead, a small flock of skuas, a half-dozen or so, circled, crying. This, this was gratuitous, this was — I didn't know how to describe it to myself; it was outside my vocabulary. As was what I saw next.

There, running toward us from over the rise beyond the camp, was Frigga. For a moment that stretched on elastically, I was sure my mind had broken, that the superabundant carnage spread out in front of me had snapped it with the ease with which you snap a match between your fingers. So, I thought, this is insanity, as I watched her race closer, her back hunched, her braid flapping from side to side like the tail of an animal, her sightless eyes pointed at me, her mouth open wide, her arms stretched out to either side of her, her fingers hooked. Amazing, I thought, what detail. Then Bruce saw her too and started screaming, which was all it took for me to know I was not insane, and even as I knew this I felt a tremendous regret, because I was not sure my mind could support Frigga running across the ground and everything that implied, and I felt a tremendous

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fear, my gut squeezing. I leveled the pistol, aligning the sights on Frigga's chest, and squeezed the trigger. The gun roared, almost kicking itself from my hands, but I held onto it and fired again, and again, and again. I could see the fabric of her tunic pucker where the bullets struck with what at this distance should have been sufficient force to knock a big man sprawling with several large holes in him. I fired again before she was on me, striking me on the side of the head with a kindling-thin arm that connected like a heavy club in the hands of a weightlifter, sweeping me from my feet and sending me rolling down the hill. Everything spun around, and around, and around, then I hit the bundle that was my duffel bag.

On the hillside above, Bruce was screaming. Pushing myself up on my hands, I saw him on his back, Frigga straddling him, one hand at his throat, the other approaching his jaw. My God, I thought, the warning was true: She's going to take his face. She did not care that Bruce had had nothing to do with what had happened to her so long ago: She had suffered, and now someone else could suffer. The pistol had fallen from my grip, but was close; I picked it up, aimed it, and emptied the rest of the clip into Frigga's back. It did not affect her in the least. As Bruce struggled to free her hand from his throat, she dug the thumb of her other hand into his skin and began drawing it along his jaw, blood squirting out as she split his flesh. His screams increased. Enraged, I threw the useless pistol at her. It struck her head and fell to the side, without her noticing. Frantically, I looked about for a weapon, for something that might be of use against her, as her thumb continued its circuit of Bruce's face and his screams continued. Guns were useless, and I doubted explosives — the sword! It had kept her in place for a thousand years: It might be effective. Bruce had rolled it up inside the tent to protect it. The tent was behind my duffel bag; I dropped to my knees and began furiously untying the tent's straps. Bruce's screams continued. I fought with a knot, tore the strap off. I undid the remaining strap, unrolled the tent, shouting for Bruce to hold on. His screams continued. I did not look up. Two pairs of socks, a sweater, where was the sword? there! swaddled in a blanket I yanked away. There was a tearing sound, like a shirt caught on a nail, and Bruce's screams became a wet, choked gurgle. I looked up, the sword in my hand, and saw that I was too late: Frigga had taken Bruce's face, peeled it off him the way you might peel

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an orange, and draped it over her own ruined face. His face gone, his throat split open by her thumb, Bruce was dead. Through the ragged holes in Bruce's face, Frigga's empty sockets gazed at me, and my mind trembled at the sight. In a bound, she had leapt off him, and was running toward me.

I fled. Sword in hand, I ran as fast as I could for the beach, praying that the boat would have made its appearance, that it would be sitting there in the bay and I would be able to swim out to it, leave Frigga behind. Even as the beach came into view, though, and I ran down onto it, slipping and almost falling on a loose rock, and I saw the bay, the sea beyond, and, yes, the ship approaching in the not-too-distant distance, I could hear Frigga's feet clattering across the rocks behind me, feel her hand reaching out to catch my jacket. She was too fast; she was on me: I was going to die here, on the beach, in sight of the ship and salvation; if I were lucky, she would break my neck and be done with me quickly. A tidal wave of rage swelled in my chest, rushing up into my brain, swamping my fear. I was going to die here, on this Godforsaken island, at the hands of a monster I had brought up out of the ground, and no one would know, no one would know any of this, anything. I caught the sword in both hands, stopped, pivoted, and swung it as hard as I could, screaming my throat raw with fury and frustration.

Frigga could not stop in time to avoid me. The blade caught her on the side of the head, cracking it, sending poor Bruce's empty face flying off her. She staggered, and I struck again, bringing the sword down on her right collar bone, breaking it and three of the ribs beneath it, ripping open her leathery skin. She swept at me with her left hand, catching me a glancing blow on the right shoulder that spun me half around; I struck her right arm and heard a bone snap. We were at the water; a wave swept around my boots. I backed into it, Frigga following, her dark face streaked with Bruce's blood. The freezing water rising to my knees, my thighs, I continued back, holding the sword before me. Frigga feinted to the right, then lunged at me, and with a scream I drove the sword straight through her, just under the breastbone, all the way in and out the other side, to the hilt. It pushed through her with the sound of leather tearing. I kept screaming as she stumbled and fell in the water with a splash; I kept screaming as she tried to stand and could not, flailing at the sword impaling her; I kept screaming as I pulled off my coat, tugged off my boots,

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and swam for the boat. I screamed as if screaming would defeat her. I did not see Frigga sink under the water, a crowd of skuas descending onto it as she did, flapping and crying: that was what the ship captain claimed to have seen. I was still screaming when they pulled me out of the water onto the ship, and when at last I stopped screaming, all I would say, for a week, in reply to whatever question was posed to me, was, "They're dead. They're all dead. She got them. Frigga got them."

Of course, that isn't enough for you. Of course, you want to hear more; you want to know what happened next. It's all right: I would, too. I was put in a hospital, in Edinburgh, in a private room. I saw various doctors, took various medications, and had many interviews with many men, some of them in uniform, some in suits. I told them all the same story I told you. I presume there was an investigation, even several, although apparently Frigga was not found; that was what I was told, at least. No charges of any kind were brought against me; why they would have been, I'm not sure, except that when things go wrong to this magnitude and this many people die, a scapegoat is usually required. I have no idea what explanation was provided Bruce's family, whether his body was returned to them and if so in what state. In the hospital, I tried to compose a letter expressing my sympathy at their loss, but I could not write anything that did not sound too much like a lie, so in the end I sent a generic card that a nurse bought for me. I presume the deaths of Collins, Ryan, Joseph, and the others were assigned an unrelated tragic cause: lost at sea during training maneuvers; killed when their helicopter went down. Eventually, I was released from the hospital, with a generous supply of pills to keep me from waking in the night, screaming. I taught at Aberdeen the following semester, actually delivering my own lectures and running my own tutorials, but I returned home before the last semester, leaving the department in the lurch and not caring that I did. They have not invited me back; I've had no desire to return. My career since then — has been less than it could have been. I — I think I've psychoanalyzed myself sufficiently for one night. I'll leave the reasons for my failure to achieve, whether they be guilt, fear, heredity, a combination of the lot, or none of the above, to your discussion.

I tend to avoid the sea. Had I realized how close this house is to the Atlantic, I most likely would not have come. You told me, Bob, I simply

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wasn't paying attention. Beside the sound and smell of the ocean, I try to stay busy; when my mind is free, I wonder: Was that final blow sufficient to kill Frigga? Can you even speak of such a thing, is it possible? The birds, the skuas, what were they doing there? Did the deaths of Collins and the men, Bruce's death, satisfy her, or even now, as we sit here talking, is she making her way toward me? Nights like this, if I'm unwise or unlucky enough to find myself by the sea, I imagine — well, I'm sure you can guess.

—For Fiona, and for Bob & Kappa Waugh

COMING ATTRACTIONS

WE WENT MORE than ten years without bringing you one of our special issues dedicated to a single author. Now, a mere six months after our last one, we have another scheduled for September. (Some years are like that.)

Our celebration of Kate Wilhelm next month is long overdue. The issue comes almost exactly forty years after she made her first sale to *F&SF* and it features a wonderful new novella, "Yesterday's Tomorrows." Chronicling a young scientist who inherits an old house in the San Francisco environs, this story—like so many tales Ms. Wilhelm has given us—makes for lovely reading. The issue will also feature a cover by Richard Wilhelm and a secret-revealing appreciation of Ms. Wilhelm by her book editor for most of the 1990s (his initials are GVG).

Our October double issue is shaping up like a real Halloween treat. In addition to a new fantasy novelet by Poul Anderson and a science fiction novella by Ian Watson, we've got two dark fantasies on tap: an unsettling duffer's tale by Ray Bradbury and a clever, macabre short-short by Neil Gaiman. It all makes for wonderful reading—be sure to subscribe so you won't miss any of these upcoming issues.

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World traveler, war correspondent and latter-day recluse, Starrett (1886-1974) was a consummate man of letters, writing large quantities of fiction, essays and journalism. But his erudition never interfered with his wit. Incredibly well-read, he incorporated many of his beloved fictional characters and favorite historical personages into his sprightly secret history.

A dying François Villon gives a pre-fame Christopher Columbus vague hints about the legendary Fountain of Youth on the fabled island of Bimini. That one alluring whisper is all it takes to propel this episodic novel across the centuries, as various immortality-seekers — from Ponce de Leon to Cyrano de Bergerac to Rabelais to Alexander Pope — seek, first, the Fountain itself, and then, when it's found and lost, a vial containing a few precious drops of its waters. The ultimate chapter, set in the twentieth century, effectively disposes of the much-handled vial in an unforeseen, hilarious manner.

Mixing literary icons such as the Three Musketeers and Don Quixote on the same stage with more well-documented folks, Starrett presaged a free-and-easy postmodernism. This oftentimes Blaylockian novel merits Peter Ruber's description as "one of the great under-appreciated fantasies of this century."

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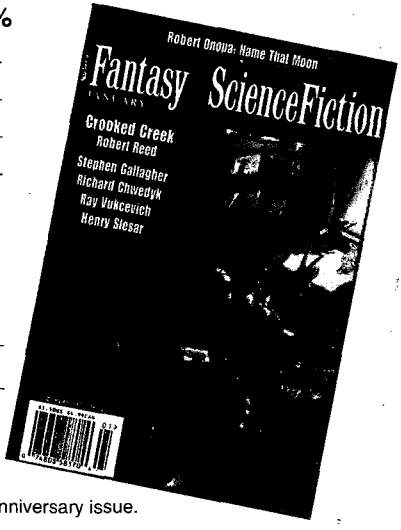

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